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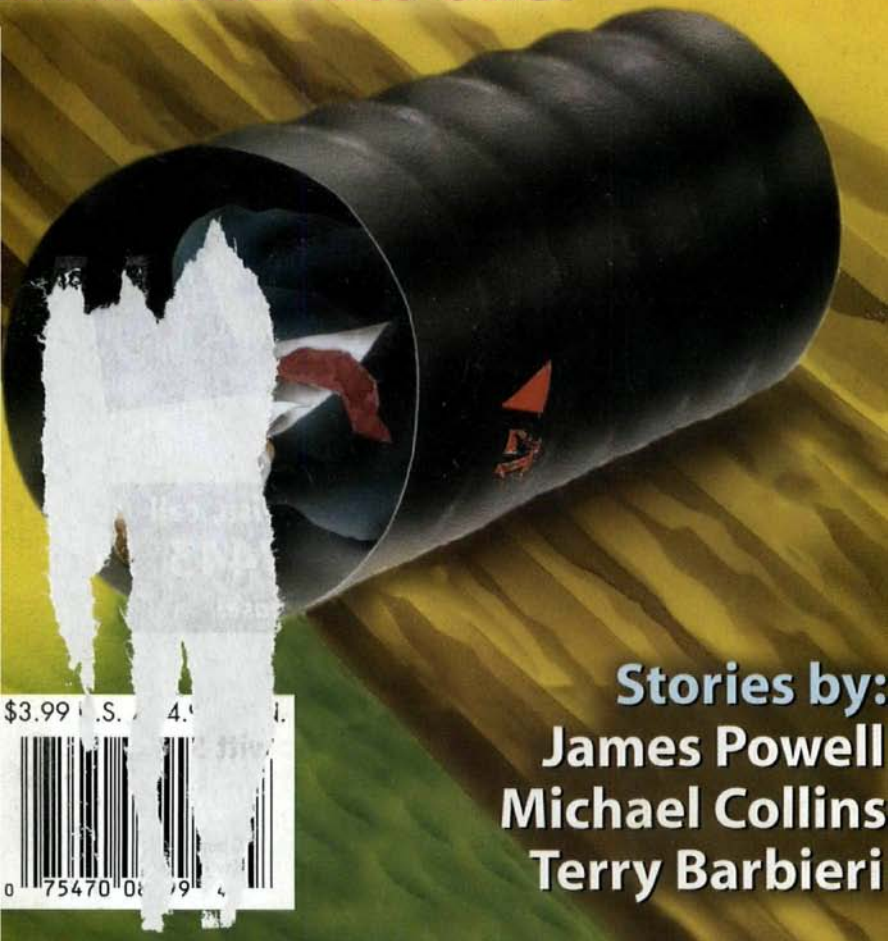

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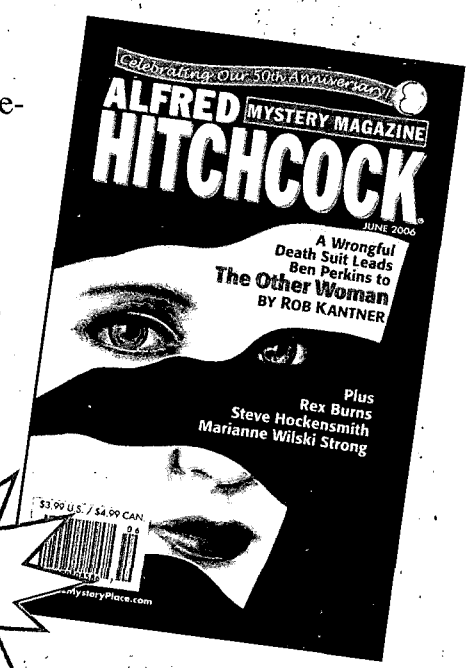

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THE FINAL CUT

by Terry Barbieri

On the twenty years I've served as sheriff for Torrent County, Wyoming, I've always taken my oath of office seriously. I make it my business to uphold the laws of man. But the summer Clayton Wilcox disappeared, the summer a wild, homeless girl mingled with the horses at Clayton's ranch, I learned that legal justice and true justice are not always one and the same.

The Friday afternoon Carlotta, Clayton's housekeeper, visited my office and reported him missing, I figured he'd just taken off and forgotten to mention it to anyone.

"When was the last time you saw him?" I asked as she stood in front of my desk, Pillsbury Dough arms folded across her chest, the hint of a moustache shadowing her upper lip.

"Monday, maybe. Usually if he's going to be gone on payday, he has me pick up my check at his accountant's office."

"Have you checked with his accountant?"

"I just came from there. He hasn't heard from Clayton all week. He said it's strange 'cause Clayton had him draft a cashier's check for a filly he's had his eye on."

By *filly* I assumed Carlotta meant a quarter horse with bloodlines more impressive than Caroline Kennedy's. Clayton breeds the

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best cutting horses this side of the Rockies. Cutters out of his stallion, Razor Sharp, have a higher earning potential than a Harvard graduate.

"Are any of his vehicles gone?" I asked.

"Hell if I know. He's got more cars and trucks than most people have shoes."

"Anything else suspicious out there?"

"I ain't sayin' his not showing up is suspicious. He's probably placing bets at some rodeo somewhere. I'm just sayin' I want my pay. Ain't it illegal to work someone and not pay them?"

"Yes, but I don't think Clayton meant to cheat you. Let me see if I can track him down and we'll get it straightened out."

Texan Terry Barbieri describes herself as a longtime *EQMM* reader, but for the past several years her own short stories have been bringing her attention as a writer. She has been nominated twice for the Pushcart Prize, and in 2004 her story "Vanishing Point" won the Edgar for best short story. Her fiction has appeared in many literary magazines but never before in *EQMM*.

After Carlotta left, I called the people most likely to have heard from Clayton: his vet, his farrier, and the bartender over at the Golden Spur. The farrier had been out to Quicksilver, Clayton's ranch, earlier that week. "I had an appointment to trim his horses' hoofs, but Clayton wasn't there. I took care of the horses anyway. All except that stallion of his."

I'd heard about Razor Sharp's foot fetish. It took crossties and two grown men to pick out his front hoofs. No one could touch his back feet. The last guy who tried landed in the emergency room with a broken rib.

"Who's taking care of his horses?"

"He's got a couple of cowhands living out there. And there was a girl hanging around. That wolf girl everyone's been talking about."

I'd heard people at the Golden Spur talking about the brown-skinned girl who'd been slipping in and out of local ranches all summer. Some people swore she'd been raised by wolves. Others figured she'd fled the Wind River Reservation. Rumor had it that the first time someone saw her, she was buck naked and that she bore a scar, an actual brand, on her left hip.

More curious about the girl's appearance than Clayton's disappearance, I put on my weathered Stetson and headed out to Quicksilver. The sun had already begun to set behind the Grand Tetons, throwing their jagged shadows onto the plain below. From here they looked like the exposed vertebrae of some prehistoric beast.

Reaching the wrought-iron arch marking the entrance to Clayton's ranch, I turned into the mile-long driveway and followed it past the house to a brick stable twice the size of our local elemen-

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tary school. Each of its stalls opened onto a paddock. As I climbed out of my truck, horses trotted back and forth along the white-washed fences. Downhill, a herd of black Angus gathered around a wide pond, purpling in the twilight.

The smell of barbeque reminded me that I hadn't eaten dinner. My nose led me back behind the stable yard, where a couple of ranch hands sat on lawn chairs and drank beer as they roasted sausages over an open campfire. The wind-whipped flames sounded like sheets flapping on a clothesline right before a storm.

"Hey." I greeted the cowhand I recognized as Jake from the Golden Spur. Like Carlotta, he must not have gotten paid today. If he had, he'd be over at the saloon washing down his usual buffalo cheeseburger with a pitcher of beer.

Jake looked up. "Do you know Ryan? Ryan, this is our sheriff, Mac Corley."

I tipped my hat. "Have either of you seen Clayton?"

"Nope."

"Any idea where he is?"

Jake glanced at the stable. "Maybe you should ask that wolf girl who's been hanging around. She sees and hears everything. The only problem is, she don't talk."

Ryan spoke up. "She ain't no wolf girl. If anything, she was raised by horses. You should see her with them."

"Beer?" Jake held out a bottle of Budweiser. Having discovered, long ago, that people talk more when I join them in a drink, I gladly accepted it. I only wished he would offer me a sausage as well.

As I twisted off the bottle cap, Ryan continued. "She's been watching us with the horses and does everything we do. Brushes them, picks out their hoofs."

Jake turned his sausage. "I had to hide the worming paste after we wormed them this morning. I was afraid she'd give them a second dose. She gets in Razor Sharp's stall and he doesn't raise a hoof. She actually combed out his mane yesterday."

I picked up a stick and poked at the fire. "How long has she been hanging around?"

Several drops of grease escaped from Jake's sausage, causing the fire to sizzle and spit. "A couple of weeks. Wanna see her?"

"Sure."

Carrying their half-cooked dinner with them, Jake and Ryan led me into the stable, where the comforting smells of pine shavings, hat, and oats greeted us. We checked the feed and tack rooms, then entered the long corridor between the stalls. I could hear the horses' collective breath as they raised their heads to take in our scent.

Peering into the stalls, one at a time, I was halfway down the corridor when Jake called to me from the far end. "Here she is."

"Don't get too close," he warned as I approached. He tapped the brass plaque identifying the horse inside. *Razor Sharp.* Clayton's

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silver grullo stallion, with his flowing black mane and black tail, stared at me through slate-blue eyes. He shuffled his feet, but took care not to step on the girl seated Indian-style in the far corner. The girl's equally black hair hung past her waist. She wore a faded cotton dress, three sizes too large.

Razor Sharp's was the only stall that did not open onto a paddock. Sheets of aluminum lined the walls. Apparently he had a history of kicking out boards. The aluminum bore more dents than a pickup truck after a hail storm. It made me angry to look at him, all that energy confined to a box. Hell, I couldn't stand the four walls of my own office for more than an hour at a time.

"How often do you turn him out?"

"We don't," Jake answered. "He jumps the fences to join the mares. If a gelding gets anywhere near them, Razor attacks."

"The girl lets him out sometimes," Ryan added. "We have a hell of a time getting him back in."

"Clayton was trying to tame her." Jake looked at the girl as he spoke. "After the first week, she'd take food from his hand. The strangest thing was last Friday. Clayton was grooming Sterling, his newest colt out of Razor Sharp, and the girl joined him. They brushed him together and then Clayton, real slow like, reached over and touched the brush to the girl's hair. I thought she'd take off, but she just stood there, leaning against Sterling's neck while Clayton brushed and brushed."

The following morning, I returned to Quicksilver with a search warrant and a list of vehicles registered to Clayton Wilcox. I checked all the rooms and closets in the main house, then walked over to the garage, so large it could have served as a hangar. Inside, Clayton's vehicles sparkled like freshly cut gemstones. Silverado pickup. Cherokee Pioneer. Cadillac. Horse trailer. Mustang convertible. 1932 Pierce-Arrow. All present and accounted for. There was even one vehicle that wasn't on my list, a covered wagon. Four harnesses, decorated with brass studs, hung on the wall behind it. One of the four didn't shine like the others. Taking a closer look, I found that it was splattered with mud. Something wasn't right. Clayton would never have allowed anyone to hang up the harness in that condition. Who had used it last and for what purpose? I pulled my cell phone from my pocket and called one of my deputies, Mark Touchstone.

Touchstone arrived an hour later. A man of few words, he had inherited his blue eyes and his cryptic smile from his Nordic mother, his dark complexion and his uncanny ability to read the ground, as if it were a newspaper recounting recent events, from his Arapaho father. I filled him in on Clayton's disappearance, then took him into the garage.

Taking down the soiled harness, Touchstone ran his fingers over the brass studs as if he were reading Braille, then raised the

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straps to his nose. "This leather's been wet. See how it's starting to crack." He returned it to the wall. "Let's have a look at the horses."

We walked over to the stable yard, where I spied the girl in the far corral grooming one of the mares. She straightened up as we approached, the wind tossing her hair to one side like a mane.

She watched as Touchstone examined the ground around the stable and visited each of the horses. When he entered the last corral, the girl stepped behind the mare she'd been brushing. She made a point of keeping the animal between herself and Touchstone as he slowly circled around them. I listened as Touchstone addressed her in Arapaho. She didn't answer.

Placing one foot on the lowest fence rail, Touchstone swung his other leg over and climbed out of the corral. I joined him and together we headed downhill towards the pond. Every few yards, he stopped to finger a bent blade of grass or examine an indentation left by a hoof.

When we neared the water's edge, he stooped down. "Look at this." He pointed to a pair of footprints and a set of hoofprints. "Someone, an older kid or a woman, led a horse down here." He looked over his shoulder, but the girl had vanished. "From the angle and the spacing of the prints, I'd say the horse was pulling something—not a cart, but something heavy—over the ground. You should have someone drag that pond."

Once Touchstone had finished examining the ground around the pond, we turned and cut across the open pasture towards the driveway. Halfway there, we stopped in our tracks as a herd of horses came barreling towards us. For a moment, they reminded me of wild mustangs, but they had to be Clayton's cutting horses. Jake and Ryan must have turned them out to graze. Three blacks, two roans, one sorrel, and a flash of silver. "Isn't that Razor Sharp?"

Touchstone looked at me. "Who?"

"Clayton's stud. He's not supposed to be out." I looked around for Jake and instead saw the girl, now standing in the middle of the pasture, the wind twisting her dress tightly around her. The horses circled round and galloped towards her. As they reached her, three forked off to the right, three to the left, like a river pouring past a rock. Only Razor Sharp stopped in front of her. He nodded his head up and down, as if he were telling her something. Then he lowered his head and the girl leaned forward and pressed her forehead against his. The wind lifted his black mane. Her hair.

Several hours later, a crew met me at Quicksilver. I kept out of their way and watched as they dragged the pond. During the first hour, they fished out two logs, a blue tarp, and the skeleton of a Christmas tree. It was close to five when they dragged out Clayton's waterlogged body. We stared—not at his bloated face and

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torso, but at the horseshoes someone had tied to his arms and legs to keep him from floating to the surface.

Even though Evelyn Wilcox had divorced Clayton three years earlier, I felt I should inform her of his death in person. She and Clayton had two sons, both away at college. I wanted her to have a chance to call the boys herself before Clayton's death made headlines.

I parked in the circular driveway leading to her flagstone house, overlooking our county's only golf course. Evelyn herself opened the door. With her long, expertly teased blond hair, she could have passed for a televangelist's wife. Her foundation had settled into the creases around her eyes. "Sheriff Corley. Is everything okay? It's not the boys, is it?"

"No, it's not the boys. Is there a place where we can talk?"

She ushered me into a living room with soaring windows overlooking the golf course. A stone fireplace rose between the windows. Animal hides decorated the other three walls. "Can I get you a drink?"

"No, thanks."

That didn't stop Evelyn from fixing herself a screwdriver.

I waited for her to take a seat before I told her, "I'm afraid I have some bad news. Clayton's dead."

"What happened?"

"He disappeared several days ago. We just found his body at the bottom of the pond. Do you have any idea why someone might have wanted to kill him?"

Her face paled. She blinked several times and her lower lashes bled black. "I haven't spoken to him since Christmas."

"Ms. Wilcox, would you mind if I asked why you left him?"

"That's funny; most people ask why I stayed as long as I did. He was a bit of a wanderer. He . . . Let's just say Clayton liked his fillies green broke."

Clearly she wasn't talking about horses. I thought of the girl haunting the stable at Quicksilver and Jake's comment that Clayton was trying to tame her. "I'm sorry."

Evelyn set her empty glass on the bar and walked me to the front door. Outside, the wrought-iron gaslights had already come on. A gust of wind blew a paper bag across Evelyn's lawn and a metallic scent, promising rain, hung in the air.

As I climbed into my truck, I thought about the girl at Quicksilver. She was probably bedding down, at this very moment, on a pile of shavings in the corner of Razor Sharp's stall. Had Clayton reached out to the girl because he actually wanted to help her? Or did he have something else in mind?

Monday morning I was in my office mopping up the coffee I'd managed to slosh on a stack of papers awaiting my attention when the forensic pathologist called. "Looks like Clayton Wilcox was beaten

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with a blunt instrument. Hard to be sure, given the amount of time the body spent under water, but some of the marks look like hoofs."

"Are you saying he was kicked to death?"

"Kicked. Stomped. One side of his rib cage was crushed."

"Are we talking one horse or a stampede?"

"There were no blows to the head, so I doubt it was a stampede. But I've never heard of a single horse stomping a man to death."

Neither had I. "Thanks."

I considered Razor Sharp's reputation for going after any gelding who got near his mares. Surely he wouldn't have attacked Clayton over a mare. Then I thought about how the girl had kept a horse between herself and Touchstone the other day, when he had entered the corral. It was as if she expected the animal to protect her. Had Clayton tried to molest her? If he had, and if Razor Sharp had seen her struggle, would the stallion have come to her rescue? I imagined her tying the horseshoes to Clayton's wrists and ankles and dragging him into the pond to protect that stallion.

It was just a hunch, but I had to see the girl. I knew she couldn't speak. Still, maybe she would understand my questions. If I could gain her trust, would she at least nod and shake her head? Give some answer away with her eyes? It was a long shot, but I got in my truck and headed towards Quicksilver. Half a mile from the entrance, I spied the young woman loping bareback across the field on a silver stallion, the wind whipping up her black hair. Six other horses followed close behind.

The stallion picked up speed as he approached the fence, then sailed over. The girl rose off his back, regaining her seat as his hoofs skimmed the ground. Razor Sharp. Two horses followed them over the fence. A third, a sorrel mare with a white star on her forehead, struck the top rail with her back hoof and tumbled to the ground.

Skidding to a stop, I jumped out of my truck and raced towards the mare, as she rolled from side to side and flailed her hoofs. Standing back, I tried to tell if anything was broken. Then the mare rolled once more, gathered her legs beneath her, struggled to her feet, and shook herself. An instant later she took off after the other horses.

The three mares who'd been left behind whinnied and scratched at the earth. For a moment, I was tempted to break off the rail the sorrel mare had cracked when she tripped over it. But I didn't. The girl and the horses who had made it over would come across other fences and would jump those too, until they reached a stretch of land where there were no more rails, no more barbed wire. No more bridles or spurs or brands. These three mares, pacing and pawing the ground, had not made the final cut.

It was nature's decision, not mine. I could no more set these horses free than I could call the others back. I watched as Razor Sharp and his herd disappeared over the horizon, the western wind erasing the dust they kicked up behind them. ●

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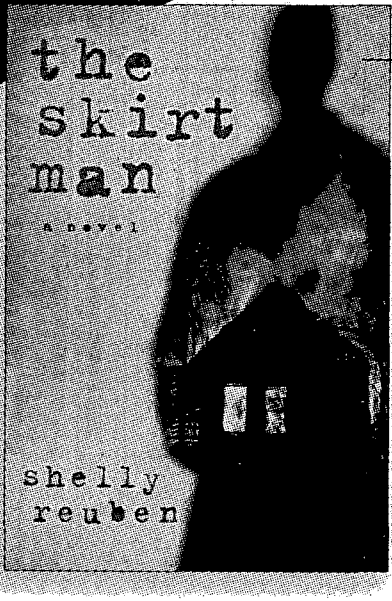

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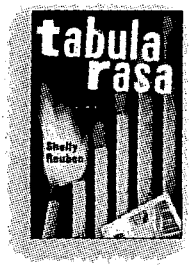
—Dorothy Salisbury Davis



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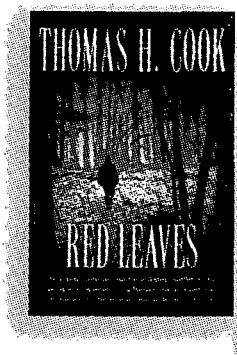

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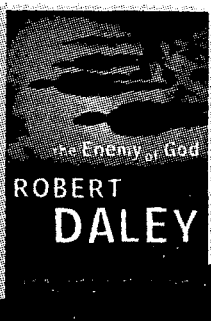

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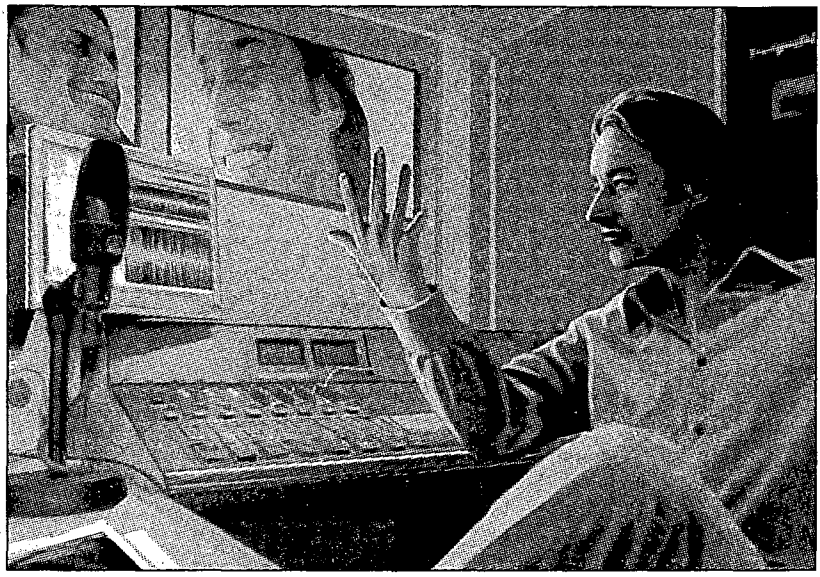

Art by Mark Evans

CLOSEDOWN

by Keith Miles

Nicholas Vincey was everywhere. As you approached the radio station, you'd see giant photographs of him on the billboards and as soon as you entered the building, you'd be confronted by a life-size cardboard cutout version. There was hardly a room that didn't have at least one picture of him on its wall and the studio itself had no less than five—Nicholas Vincey shaking hands with Luciano Pavarotti, Nicholas with an arm around the shoulders of Sir Simon Rattle, Nicholas beaming at the camera in the company of other famous musical figures. It was a pictorial ratification of his status as the King of Classical Lite.

Nobody dared to call him a mere disc jockey, especially in his hearing. Nicholas Vincey was a purveyor of taste, a man of high culture with the common touch, and, most important of all, Sunrise Radio's undisputed sex symbol. Listening figures rocketed whenever Nicholas was at the microphone. He had a voice as rich and dark as melting chocolate and he poured it into the ears of his female fans with unerring skill. During the four continuous hours of "Night Ride With Nicholas Vincey," male listeners tuned in to hear the music but the women preferred the sound of his voice. It

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had the haunting resonance of a cello.

"Only another hour to go," noted Geoff Dale, looking up at the clock on the wall of the reception area. "Sixty minutes to closedown."

"More's the pity!" said Maxine Telford, dreamily. "I could listen to Nicholas all night." *Ideally from the pillow next to mine,* she thought. "He's amazing, isn't he? He knows so much."

"Yes, the trouble is that he *knows* he knows."

"He's educated. He understands music."

"You don't need education to understand a Sousa march or a Welsh Male Voice Choir. That's the kind of music I like, Maxine. Something to stir the soul."

"Anything that Nicholas plays stirs my soul."

She broke off to take a call from the latest adoring female, reading from a prepared script ("Hello, Sunrise Radio here—classic service in every sense. My name is Maxine. How can I help you?") and noting down the name and address on her computer screen. Maxine reached for a large envelope containing a signed photograph of Nicholas Vincey, then pressed a key. The caller's details were printed out on an adhesive label. All that Maxine had to do was to peel off the backing strip and affix the label to the already sealed and stamped envelope.

"That's the twenty-fourth tonight," she observed.

"Nobody ever asks me for my photo," complained Geoff. "Can't blame them, I suppose. When you've got an ugly mug like mine, you can't expect to win any beauty contests."

He gave a ripe chuckle. Geoff Dale was a former policeman in his sixties, a big, beefy man who had collected more than his share of injuries in the line of duty, and who had moved into a less stressful world. As a security officer at Sunrise Radio, he had none of the excitement and unpredictability of police work but there were many compensating virtues. Chief among them was the fact that he would always go home to his wife in one piece instead of in an ambulance. His broken nose was a souvenir from a fight he had once tried to break up at a pub, and the scar on his cheek had come from the broken bottle that a gypsy had jabbed in his face when he and a posse of other constables had tried to move the

Most of the stories *EQMM* receives from Keith Miles carry the Miles byline, under which have also appeared eight novels, six in a series starring professional golfer Alan Saxon, two in an "architectural series" set in 1930s America. But Mr. Miles has some forty published novels to his credit under his well-known pseudonym Edward Marston. The next Marston book in line for U.S. publication is *The Princess of Denmark: An Elizabethan Theater Mystery.* †

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encampment off private land.

Geoff Dale looked tired and battered. When he stood beside the cardboard cutout of Nicholas Vincey, the contrast was startling. The security officer was quick to point it out.

"Nobody would ever mistake us for twins, would they?" he joked. "Talk about Beauty and the Beast. Also, of course, I can give Nick all of thirty years. How could I hope to compete with him?"

"You don't need to, Geoff," said Maxine.

"Just as well."

"People admire you for other qualities."

"Didn't know I had any."

"Yes, you do," she told him before turning away to the switchboard as another call came in. Having taken the details, she went through the same routine with another envelope. "Number twenty-five."

"Tell me about these qualities you reckon I've got."

"You're good, kind, and generous."

He grinned. "You mean I help old ladies across the road?"

"And young ones like me, who get in a mess."

"My pleasure, love."

"You're a real friend."

Maxine was still relatively new to the station and Geoff kept a paternal eye on her, easing her through her first few awkward weeks and teaching her how to work the switchboard while holding two separate conversations. The receptionist was young, willing, and conscientious, too plump to be really attractive but with the sort of pleasant, homely face that reminded him of his wife. Geoff liked her from the start. Because of that, he told her nothing about her predecessors at the reception desk. It would have upset her.

"Oh, I *love* this," she cooed as Tchaikovsky boomed out from the speakers. "*Romeo and Juliet.* 'Fantasy Overture.' You wait," she added with a giggle. "When this is over, the phone won't stop ringing."

"Yes," he agreed. "Nick certainly knows how to reel them in."

"For all of you out there who've known the agony and the ecstasy of love, I give you . . ."

And he let Pyotr Ilyich take over.

Seated at his desk in the studio, Nicholas Vincey studied the photographs that were spread out before him. While countless women requested his picture, there was an endless stream of them who sent him a photograph of themselves, sometimes with a letter, sometimes with a note, always with an invitation, ranging from the discreet to the glaringly obvious. His favorite had been from a sultry brunette who had covered her naked body with pieces of sheet music. He had recognized the Chopin polonaise at

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once. Nicholas had played it while making love to her. Or, to be more precise, a CD of his rendition had accompanied their frantic copulation.

What set Nicholas Vincey apart from all other disc jockeys was that he had been a fine musician in his own right, a gifted pianist who was talked of in the same breath as his idols, Barenboim and Ashkenazy. When a car accident brought a premature end to Nicholas's career and left him with a damaged hand, he did not become a conductor like the two pianists he had worshiped. He turned to radio and became the voice of classical music.

"Don't put those boxes of tissues away just yet," he warned as the overture came to an end, "because you may need them for this next piece. Another Russian essay in thwarted romance, but this time it comes from Sergei Vassilievich Rachmaninov. Let me tell you a little about the composer to deepen your appreciation of his music . . ."

Nicholas talked on and slipped the new CD into position, pressing the play button at just the right moment. He was a true professional. The reason the radio station liked him and paid him far more than anyone else was that he was a one-man show, a musician so steeped in his craft that he needed no script and no producer to supply him with a playlist. Nicholas Vincey chose, introduced, and knew by heart every CD that he offered to his public between the hours of ten at night and two o'clock in the morning. Advertisers fought for a spot on his show. His program reached millions of potential customers.

Work at Sunrise Radio had opened up all kinds of commercial possibilities—personal appearances, advertising contracts, lucrative backhanders from record companies to plug their latest CDs. But there was an even better spin-off. His program was also an exclusive dating agency. "Night Ride With Nicholas Vincey" had furnished him with an endless supply of night rides. He was a musical Casanova.

"They're getting younger," said Maxine after fielding the latest telephone request for a photograph. "That girl couldn't have been more than twelve or thirteen."

"Nicholas appeals to all ages," admitted Geoff, ruefully. "My wife will be listening right now and Mary will be sixty-two in July."

"Does she like classical music?"

"Never showed the slightest interest in it until he started to work for Sunrise Radio. Mary says she only switches on to keep her mind occupied while she's waiting for me to get home from the night shift, but I know the truth. She's hooked on that voice of his. My wife is part of Nicholas's fan club—the Old Age Pensioner section."

"Every listener counts."

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"True. It's them that pays our wages."

Rachmaninov was still filling their ears when the man who had set him in motion came charging out of the studio in a light-blue seersucker shirt and navy-blue slacks. Tall, slim, and handsome, Nicholas had an intensity that somehow added to his charm. Maxine sat up with a start at the mere sight of him, but he ignored her.

"Shouldn't you be outside, Geoff?" he asked with a note of reproof.

"I did my rounds ten minutes ago," said the security officer.

"Do them again. We don't want trespassers."

"There's nobody out there, Nick. I promise you."

"Double-check, will you?"

"If you say so, mate."

"I do say so," snapped Nicholas, "and I'm not your mate."

"Sorry."

Geoff gave an apologetic shrug and ambled across to unlock the door. The car park was well lit and he could see that it was empty apart from two cars and a motorbike. However, with a resigned smile, he went off to patrol the exterior of the building once more. Nicholas looked at Maxine for the first time.

"Another coffee, please," he said.

"Yes, Mr. Vincey."

"Only one spoonful of sugar this time."

"There was only one last time, Mr. Vincey."

"Then use a smaller spoon."

"I will," she said, getting up from her seat.

"How many calls tonight?"

"Twenty-six."

"And they were all about the program?"

Maxine simpered. "They were all about you, Mr. Vincey," she said. "You have a lot of fans out there—including Mary."

"Who?"

"Geoff's wife. She never misses your program, apparently."

"Turns up her hearing aid to full volume, does she?" he said with a sneer. "Now, hurry up with that coffee, Stephanie."

"My name is Maxine."

But he paid no attention. Nicholas was darting back into the studio to resume the seat of power. His loyal late-nighters needed him.

Years of pounding a beat had given Geoff Dale an instinct for danger and there was no hint of it outside. He walked around the perimeter of the building then strolled across the car park to test the huge iron gates before peering through them into the darkness beyond. Sunrise Radio was situated in a fairly isolated part of the Kent countryside. There were no passersby at that time of

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the morning. It had been different in the early months of Nicholas Vincey's reign over the airwaves. Groups of young women turned up night after night, shivering in the cold or huddling against the rain, just to get a glimpse of the great man as his Maserati swept away from the station shortly after two A.M.

That had all stopped. Instead of coming to Sunrise Radio, fans mobbed him when he was opening a new supermarket or making one of his other well-advertised public appearances. Geoff Dale could not understand the man's appeal, but it was certainly there. His wife was visible proof of the fact. Mary would leave the room whenever her husband played "Stars and Stripes Forever" and the Treorchy Male Voice Choir was guaranteed to send her out of the house at a canter. And yet the Pied Piper of Sunrise Radio could somehow make her dance to his tune. It was maddening.

Having completed his rounds, Geoff let himself back into reception.

"Anyone out there?" asked Maxine.

"Not a soul," he replied. "There never is. But Nick makes me go out there time and again."

"Why?"

"It's private, love."

"I won't tell anyone, I promise."

There was a wide-eyed sincerity about Maxine that persuaded him to trust her. Having sworn her to secrecy, he stepped in close to impart the news.

"Nick's had a few dodgy phone calls," he explained.

"Dodgy?"

"Some bloke keeps threatening him."

"Why?"

"Search me."

"Who could possibly want to threaten Mr. Vincey?" she said in disbelief. "He's such a wonderful human being."

"I reckon it's a jealous husband. I told him to ignore the calls."

"He should report them to the police."

"That's why he came to me, love. Problem is, they're always made on a mobile or from a phone box. Difficult to trace, see? So I gave him the advice I always gave to women who had nuisance calls."

"Put the receiver straight down?"

"No," said Geoff. "Have a scream alarm handy so that you can set it off in the bastard's ear. That usually does the trick."

Maxine was sympathetic. "Oh dear! I didn't realize that Nicholas was having trouble like this. The price of fame, I suppose. No wonder he was so crabby with me earlier on. He told me off for putting too much sugar in his coffee."

"I've warned you before. He likes to throw his weight around."

"He keeps calling me Stephanie."

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"She had the job before you came along."

"Did she look like me or something?"

"No, love," he said with a wry smile. "Stephanie was very different. Lovely girl, she was. Joy to work with—until Nicholas got her sacked."

"What for?" asked Maxine in alarm. "It wasn't for putting too much sugar in his coffee, was it?"

Geoff sighed. "It was a bit more personal than that," he said. "He had a problem with her—and Stephanie wasn't the first. Nick's had two other receptionists booted out on a whim. His listeners might love him, but he has a darker side. Yes," he went on as the familiar voice came out of the speakers once again, "Nicholas Vincey has got away with murder."

He still felt the pain in his left hand. Two years after the incident, Nicholas got sharp twinges to remind him of the fatal night. When he had released Debussy on his listeners, he flexed the three remaining fingers on his left hand, then rubbed them hard. CONCERT PIANIST IN CAR CRASH. The newspaper headlines had earned him a tidal wave of sympathy. When his career as a musician was cut cruelly short, everyone felt sorry for him.

Well, almost everyone, that is. *She* didn't feel sorry at all and the worst of it was that he had to pay her to keep her mouth shut. The car accident had been faked. All the reports said that Nicholas Vincey had been alone in the car when it was forced off the road by a reckless driver. Only two people knew the truth. He had been giving Andrea a lift and had expected more than verbal thanks. Nicholas assumed that they had an understanding. Other girls who accepted a lift were only too compliant, but Andrea was the exception to the rule.

When they pulled over that night, she wondered why they had stopped in such a secluded spot. She refused him a kiss and, as he tried to grope her, pushed him away. That only served to enrage him and he took a firmer grip on her. Andrea was strong and determined. She fought back hard and—when she finally escaped his clutches—slammed the door on his outstretched left hand. The pain had been unimaginable and there was a serious threat to his reputation if the full facts ever got out. Andrea had to be bought off with some of the money he got from the insurance company. Had they known that the accident occurred as a result of attempted rape, they might not have paid up so readily for the damage to his left hand.

"Bitch!" he said to himself. "Bitch, bitch, bitch!"

Nicholas had just realized why his left hand was hurting so much. Andrea was a violinist with the London Symphony Orchestra and it was their version of Debussy's "Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune" that was now reaching out to his audience. Some-

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where in the second violins, Andrea was bowing away, reviving horrid memories for him of their night in his car. Because of her, he had been deprived of his destiny as a pianist. And because of her, his whole view of women had changed. Nicholas didn't take them out of love or lust anymore. His romances were sponsored by a deep-seated hatred. Every one of them was Andrea Collingwood. Sex was simply a means of punishment. The women who smiled up hopefully at him from their photographs did not know what was coming to them. They would be part of his revenge against the one person who had dared to resist his advances.

His mobile phone rang and jerked him out of his reverie. He did not recognize the number that was displayed but switched on nevertheless. He put the phone to his ear with some trepidation.

"Yes?" he asked.

"I'm coming to get you," said a man's voice.

Then the line went dead.

Maxine was alone in reception when he stormed out of the studio. She was sipping coffee as she listened to Debussy. Seeing him approach, she put the mug down at once and beamed helpfully at him.

"Anything I can do for you, Mr. Vincey?"

"Did you put a call through to my mobile?" he accused.

"No, I don't even know the number."

"Well, someone does."

"The only calls I get are from your fans. Almost thirty so far."

"Was there a man among them?"

"No, Mr. Vincey."

"Where's Geoff?"

"He went to get his gear. Closedown is only ten minutes away."

"You don't need to tell me that."

"Was your coffee all right this time?" she inquired politely.

"Who cares?"

He swung on his heel and marched off to the storeroom. Geoff Dale had taken off his uniform and was putting on his leather jerkin. He gave Nicholas a friendly grin.

"Not long to go now. Escape at last."

"I had another call," said Nicholas. "On my mobile."

"But you changed it. How did he get the number?"

"That's what *I* want to know, Geoff. I thought at first that that dimwitted girl on the switchboard might have given it away, but she doesn't know what the number is."

"She's a good kid," said the other, defensively, "so show her a bit more respect. And her name is Maxine, by the way—not Stephanie."

"They're all the same to me."

"What did that bloke say this time?"

"That he was coming to get me."

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"That all?"

"That's enough, isn't it?" complained Nicholas. "How would you like to hear threats in the early hours of the morning?"

"I'm used to that with my wife."

"This is no joke, Geoff."

"I'm sorry," said the security officer, reaching for his crash helmet, "though I honestly don't think you've anything to worry about. If someone really wanted to hurt you, they wouldn't warn you in advance. It's probably just some nutcase trying to put the wind up you."

"He succeeded."

"If you don't recognize a caller's number, don't answer."

"What if he's out there now?"

"Not a chance. Who's going to climb over those gates?"

"Will you check for me?"

"I did that twenty minutes ago."

"Look again, please. All round."

"Sure," said Geoff, obligingly. "I'll even take my torch and check outside the gates. But I can promise you there's nobody out there. The security cameras would have picked him up and they've been blank all night. There's only the three of us here."

Nicholas chewed his lip. "Who *is* he?"

"Only you can answer that."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, you must know who your enemies are."

"I don't have any."

Geoff laughed. "Really? You're young, rich, talented, and handsome and you can have any woman you choose. That's not the way to make friends among the male population. When they look at Nicholas Vincey, they smolder with envy. You've got *everything,"* he stressed. "And that means you're bound to attract enemies."

"Thank you again for sharing four hours of magical music with me, and I hope that you'll be with me again tomorrow for 'Night Ride With Nicholas Vincey.' Goodbye . . ."

His voice lingered over the farewell and Maxine felt a thrill of pleasure. Listening to him was always a delight. Working with Nicholas was a privilege even if he was in a fractious mood that night. Now that the station had closed down for five hours, it was time for her to drive home in her ancient Mini. One day, she fantasized, Nicholas would give her a lift in his Maserati. Life did not get any better than that.

"Nothing," said Geoff Dale, coming back into the building. "The place is deserted. Off you go, Maxine. I'll lock up."

"I'm almost ready."

She pretended to search her handbag. Geoff knew that she was only hanging on for a chance of seeing Nicholas again. It had been

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the same with Stephanie and the girls who preceded her. They had worked the night shift to be close to the acknowledged star of Sunrise Radio. Stephanie had got far too close to him. After treating her with disdain for months, Nicholas had finally noticed her one night and—having sent the security officer on his way—had made love to her on the floor of the hospitality room. Stephanie had the bruises to prove it. Shortly after that, she was given her notice and crept away with mental scars that would never heal. Nicholas had never even spoken to her again.

"Shove off," said Geoff with a kind smile. "You need your sleep."

"So do you."

"Fat chance of that. Mary'll be waiting for me with the day's woes."

"Does she always stay up for you?" asked Maxine.

"Yes—thanks to Nick."

He put on his crash helmet and tightened the strap. Wearing a coat and carrying a shoulder bag, Nicholas came out of the studio. His face was lined with anxiety.

"Well?" he said.

"The coast is clear," Geoff assured him. "I'll open the gates and you can drive off. Good night, Nick."

"Good night."

"Good night, Mr. Vincey."

Maxine got no reply from Nicholas. He went out through the door and across the car park. She trotted after him. Having taken care to park her Mini close to his gleaming sports car, she hoped for a word from him as he got into his vehicle. Once again, she was disappointed. Ignoring her, Nicholas opened his car door and flung the briefcase onto the passenger seat. As he clambered inside the car, the gates were opened by electronic control from inside the building. Switching on the ignition, he expected a roar of power but all he got was a dull whine. He tried again with the same result. The engine was not even turning over.

Nicholas swore, banged the steering wheel, then switched on the ignition three more times. Nothing happened. He became aware of someone tapping on the window and pressed the button to lower it, but there was no power. He opened the door.

"What do you want?" he snarled at Maxine.

"Trouble with your car, Mr. Vincey?"

"Mind your own business."

"Could I offer you a lift?" she asked hopefully.

"In *that?*" He looked at the Mini with contempt. "No, thank you. I'd be taking my life in my hands. Now, clear off, will you? The last thing I need right now is an audience."

Maxine's face crumpled. She was terrified that she had upset him and that Nicholas would get her sacked as a result. When she drove off, there were tears in her eyes. In the rearview mirror, she could see the hood of the Maserati being lifted up.

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Relieved to get rid of her, Nicholas peered at the engine with more curiosity than knowledge of motor mechanics. When you paid that much for a car, you expected it to work every time. Unable to see any obvious problem, he swore under his breath again. Geoff Dale waddled across to him in his full motorbike gear.

"Know anything about cars?" asked Nicholas.

"A bit," replied the other, "but I'm better with motorbikes. I know how to take my Honda 650 to bits but this is a different class of animal." He looked under the hood of the car. "Start the engine."

"I can't, Geoff. It's as dead as a dodo."

"Battery. Do you carry a charger?"

"No."

"Then you're stuck. Call the AA."

"I could be here for hours," protested Nicholas. "I can't wait for them to send a patrol car out this far. Get me a taxi."

"Right," said Geoff, removing his crash helmet, "though I should point out that I came off duty eight minutes ago." He took out his mobile and pressed a number. "Hello. Quick Cabs? . . . Yes, we want the quickest cab you've got to Sunrise Radio . . . That's it, mate. The gates will be locked so tell the driver to toot his horn. . . . Only one passenger. . . . How long? . . . Okay. Thanks." He switched off. "Twenty minutes at most."

"Is that the best they can do?"

"It's late, Nicholas." He put his mobile away. "Talking of which, I must make tracks. Mary will be counting down the clock."

"Can't you wait until the taxi comes?"

"It's not me that wants it. Besides, I got a missus expecting me at home and she doesn't like to be kept waiting. Sorry—must go."

"It's only twenty minutes," said Nicholas, worried. "I really would appreciate your company."

"So would Mary and she gets the vote over you."

"I don't want to be left on my own."

"Go back inside the station. You've got keys and you know how to switch off the alarm system. All you have to do is to close the gates and sit tight until the taxi comes. Open the gates again to get out. They'll close automatically after five minutes." Geoff chuckled. "Play some music to pass the time. Try a pianist called Nicholas Vincey. Wonderful touch."

"I'm not asking you," warned Nicholas, his manner changing at once. "I'm telling you to stay here with me. If you don't, I'll be making an official complaint."

"Then make it against the car manufacturer. Tell them you want a model that starts when you switch on the bloody engine."

"You could lose your job over this."

"I'll take that chance."

"Stay here, damn you!"

"No can do, old son. Mary calls."

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Geoff strolled off to his motorbike and put on his crash helmet. Nicholas continued to yell at him, but his words went unheard beneath the rasp of the engine. With a cheery wave, Geoff shot off across the car park on his motorbike and out through the gates. No security officer. No receptionist. Just him. All at once, Sunrise Radio was a very lonely place to be. Nicholas lowered the hood, locked his car, then ran back to the building. After letting himself in, he disabled the alarm and flicked the switch that controlled the gates. They closed with agonizing slowness but the sight calmed his nerves. He was completely safe.

Nicholas remembered that he had someone waiting for him with the sort of welcome that he liked. He used his mobile to ring her number. A breathy female voice came on the line.

"Is that you?" she asked.

"Problem."

"Oh no! Don't say you're crying off."

"I'll be there, I promise," he said, "but my battery's packed in. A taxi should be here in twenty minutes. Allow another forty to get me out to your place then pour the first drink."

"I will, Nick. See you in an hour."

"I can't wait."

He switched off and tried to recall what her name was. It was written on the back of her photograph with her address but the photo was in the briefcase that was still in the car. Tempted to go for it, he decided to wait until the taxi arrived. He could then remind himself of the woman who would be Andrea for that night.

When his mobile rang, he looked at the number and quailed. It was him again. He knew it. It was the man with the deep growl and the threatening messages. Switching off the machine, he thrust it into his pocket and rushed off to the studio. That was his kingdom. Within its four walls, he felt supremely protected. Nobody could touch him there. It was the command center from which he controlled his listeners. Nicholas had an irresistible urge to be in control. Control of an audience at a piano recital and control of a woman in bed. He had to exert power. When he sat in front of his console, the surge of power returned.

Then the studio phone began to glow. He let out a cry of surprise and stared down at it. A ring might be picked up on the microphone during a broadcast so it was fitted with a light that went rapidly on and off. How could anyone contact him when there was nobody at the switchboard to put the call through to the studio? In any case, who could possibly know where he was in the building? It was weird. The light on the phone continued to come and go with increasing speed. There was an urgency about it that made his blood run cold.

Common sense told him to unplug the instrument, but he was somehow unable to do it. Instead—against his better judgment—he reached out a tentative hand and lifted the receiver.

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"I'm here, Nicholas," said the voice. "Here at last."

He slammed the receiver down and took out his mobile to ring the police. Before he could tap out the number, however, all the lights went out. Someone had pulled the master switch and, in doing so, set off the alarm. The noise was deafening. It drowned out any attempt he made to call the emergency number. Nicholas flew into a panic. The studio might be his preserve, but it had no lock on the door. If someone else was in the building with him, he had to run for cover and the best place to go was the hospitality room. That could be locked securely from inside. It was not so much of a run as a crawl through pitch darkness. As he groped his way along the corridor, he tripped over something and fell to the ground. When he felt the object, he realized that it was the cardboard cutout of him. Someone was playing games. Nicholas saw now that his car had been deliberately tampered with so that he would be left alone.

He was being stalked.

Nicholas made the rest of the journey on his hands and knees, scurrying along until he finally got to the hospitality room. Feeling his way inside, he shut the door, turned the key, and pushed home the bolt. Relief flooded through him. Then he became fully aware of where he was, kneeling on the carpet where he had made Stephanie—along with other victims at the station—pay for the injury inflicted on him by Andrea Collingwood. He had made them suffer as he took his pleasure, then he had cast them ruthlessly aside. He was now back at the scene of the crime. The room was throbbing with dark memories.

The beam of a torch suddenly hit his face and the voice he had heard so many times before rose up over the wail of the alarm system.

"Hello, Nick. Ready for your last night ride?"

The police were baffled. When they reached the scene, they found that the building was locked and there was no sign of forced entry. Master keys got them inside and power was quickly restored. The alarm finally fell silent. A search of the building eventually brought them to Nicholas Vincey. His dead body was lying on the carpet in the hospitality room. The skull had been smashed open by a blunt instrument. Since virtually no clues had been left behind, they decided that it was the work of a professional hit man.

One thing puzzled the police more than anything else. Nicholas Vincey had been the high priest of classical music, cruelly dismissive of any other form. Yet when his corpse was discovered, he was holding a CD of Sousa marches in his hand.

"Funny," said one of the policemen. "I've heard this bugger on the radio a few times. Real snob, he was. You know, high culture and all that crap. Nicholas Vincey wouldn't be seen dead with brass band music." ●

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AARDVARK BY GASLIGHT

by James Powell

In the falling snow the verandah looked as festive as a cemetery dumpster, with bright garlands of plastic flowers climbing every upright and festooning the railings.

Old Harry Grundig trapped a mitten in his armpit, put the bare hand in his trench coat pocket, and came up with the street address. Then, holding the paper close to his glasses, he compared it to the number over the door. He took the three steps up into the mock bower, kicked the last riser to knock the snow off his shoes, and gave the doorbell a good twist.

James Powell has written about the P.I. of this story, Harry Grundig, in two previous stories for us, "The Black Daffodil" (8/94) and "Bianca and the Seven Sleuths" (6/75). (A reference to the sleuths of the 1975 story is made in this new case.) His contributions to crime writing will be celebrated this summer at Canada's Wolfe Island Scene of the Crime Festival, where he is a guest of honor. ¶

In the time it would take an elderly woman to find the remote, hit Mute, and slip into her slippers, the hall light came on. Through the curtain he saw a shape shuffling toward him down the narrow hallway. Just in time he remembered the mitten in his armpit and stuffed it into his pocket.

A commonplace woman of the dumpy persuasion opened the door. "Well?" she demanded.

"We spoke on the phone, Mrs. Gowdy."

"Why didn't you say so? Come on in, Mr. Aardvark."

Grundig followed Gertrude Gowdy down the narrow hallway in silence. He'd given up correcting people about his name a long time ago. But he still rued the day, fifty-five years before, when he'd decided to call himself Aardvark Investigations so he'd head up the list of private eyes in the phone book.

When the woman asked over her shoulder if he remembered gaslight, Grundig confessed, "I was a country boy, Mrs. Gowdy. But I remember kerosene lamps."

"I meant *Gaslight,* the movie. You know, Bergman and Boyer," she said, leading him into a small living room dominated by a large television screen. Two easy chairs faced it. Mrs. Gowdy took

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the one farthest from the door, leaving him the other.

Grundig didn't like the setup. He preferred interviewing prospective clients face-to-face. And though muted, the movie was deep into a long car chase up and down the streets of San Francisco, turning the living room into a speedway. In a moment, Grundig knew, the black mustang would come careening over a hilltop, giving him butterflies in his stomach. He turned away and looked at Mrs. Gowdy as squarely as he could. "You mean somebody wants you to think you're going crazy?"

"Not me. My sister Carlotta. And here's the worrying part. It just might work. She is very proud of her clearheadedness. 'My old noggin has never let me down,' says Carlotta. 'No senior moments for this señorita. I'd kill myself first.'"

"So who would benefit if she did?"

"You're looking at her," said Mrs. Gowdy. "If anybody's trying to make my sister think she's crazy so she'll do herself in, it should be me. I'm the one who inherits her money, of which she has a bundle. But I'm not. So who is? And why?"

As she spoke, her eyes were fixed on the screen, ready for the part where the mustang comes spinning around the corner on two wheels, separating a parked car from its front fender, a delivery van from its side door, and the delivery man from ten dozen bagels which roll off down the steep street as if they were racing the mustang to the next corner.

Grundig always liked that part, too.

Still watching, Mrs. Gowdy said, "There we were a couple of years back, two sisters recently widowed by separate traffic accidents. So I told her, hell, sell your house and move in with me. I could use the company and so could you. So she did. But it didn't last long. When Carlotta was a kid she always liked to put on the dog. You know, airs. I thought she'd gotten over it. But no way. You see, her husband was killed by a guy who ran a red light. The guy who killed mine only ran a stop sign. So in the car every time we stopped at a light she'd give this big sigh for her dead husband. But come a stop sign and she'd have to fight to keep from giggling at mine.

"Two, three weeks ago it came to words. So when a house she rented out—old Timberlake, her husband, was big in real estate—fell vacant she moved into it. That's when things started happening."

"Like what?"

"First off, somebody broke in and tossed her living room. Well, when the policeman arrived he asked what was missing. She said, 'Nothing, that's the crazy part.' Then she remembered the old wallet in the desk drawer where she kept her spare cash. She found it among the stuff on the floor by the desk. 'I had fifty-seven dollars in here,' she said indignantly, handing over the wallet.

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"The policeman looked inside. 'Now you've got three hundred and eighteen,' he said, and gave her the fish eye as she counted it herself with mystified fingers."

"Maybe she forgot," said Grundig.

"Not money. Not Carlotta."

"So somebody's putting money in her wallet," said Grundig. "Things could be worse. What's next *Gaslight*-wise?"

"Every night Carlotta watches the local news before turning off the set and going to bed," said Mrs. Gowdy. "Now every morning she wakes up and the television's back on. And on The Dying Channel, channel ninety-nine. You know, where they sell the tombstones, coffins, and urns for your ashes."

"And the burial clothes, too, okay?" said Grundig to get her off the subject. He always avoided The Dying Channel end of the dial.

"You mean Mr. Raiment and his wonderful smile? Isn't he a card, though?" Mrs. Gowdy made her voice gruff. " 'Folks, send your loved ones to meet their Maker looking like rag bags and they'll come back to haunt you for sure. You want to remember them looking sharp and spiffy when the old coffin lid slams shut. That way you'll get closure. So come to me, Mr. Raiment, the Closure Clothier Man.' "

"Did this TV coming on start after the break-in?" asked Grundig. When Mrs. Gowdy nodded, he continued, "Well, I've heard there's a way to program TVs to do that."

"I heard that, too. And so did Carlotta and so did the policeman with the fish eye who came back when she called again. But neither of them knew how to actually do it." Mrs. Gowdy raised her hand. "Nor do I," she said, looking at Grundig.

He dutifully raised his hand and admitted, "Me either."

As the final credits for the movie cascaded down the screen Mrs. Gowdy said, "The latest incident was these faces at Carlotta's bedroom window."

"Peeping Toms?"

"Space aliens," said Mrs. Gowdy. "She lives in a cute little Queen Anne place with her bedroom in the tower. No way to get to the window from the roof. No trees close around. The policeman with the fish eye left scratching his head. So, it's up to you to solve the mystery."

"I charge a hundred a day plus expenses," warned Grundig.

"All right, put me down for two days' worth."

"So where does you sister live?" When she told him, Grundig decided it was straightforward stuff, and close to a bus stop. "I'll take the case," he said.

He was to regret his words almost at once. Mrs. Gowdy turned the sound back on for the five o'clock news. It opened with a late-breaking story, an armored-car robbery out at the new mall. A Klinx armored car had just picked up the receipts at Toad Hall,

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the fast-food cafeteria chain whose slogan "All you can eat for $5.99" had caught the imagination of the hungry masses. Back inside the armored car a tear gas canister in the moneybag went off. When the guard and driver burst out into the fresh air, two armed men wearing gas masks stepped out from behind the giant statue of Mr. Toad whose top hat and wide smile welcomed guests to the eatery, commandeered the vehicle, and drove away.

Before the newscast ended the phone rang. After a minute Mrs. Gowdy covered the receiver and said, "It's Carlotta. She's pretty badly shaken up. Now she thinks she's got second sight. You know, where you see things happen before they actually do. That armored-car robbery on the news just now, she swears she saw it two weeks ago. Only it was a bread truck."

Mrs. Gowdy uncovered the phone. "He's here now," she told her sister. "Mr. Aardvark, that's who. I said I was going to call him. Yes, it's a stupid name. But you can't blame a guy for having a stupid name. He's on his way over to see you."

"Make that tomorrow morning first thing," said Grundig, remembering he'd promised to baby-sit his two grandkids tonight so his daughter and son-in-law could go bowling.

On the long bus ride home Grundig's thoughts returned to Mr. Raiment on The Dying Channel. Back when Grundig knew him he'd been a private eye named Ray Gates, a natty dresser who worked the rough-and-tumble side of the street. Ray's trick was to stare you in the eye while flipping a silver dollar up into the air over and over again. But the dollar had a wobble to it and Gates's catch lacked conviction. You just knew he was going to drop it. And when Ray was ready to make his move he always did. Then he'd stoop for the coin and get the drop on you with the little automatic he kept in an ankle holster.

But word gets around. The next couple of times he dropped that silver dollar he got a knee in the face and, eventually, the denture that so improved his smile. Pearly Gates, they called him after that. Well, why shouldn't a guy with a name like that end up on The Dying Channel?

Grundig wondered if maybe everything had to have a trick. He watched a lot of nature shows with the grandkids, having resolved to be a better grandfather than he'd been a father. Once on a program about early wildflowers he heard this guy say skunk cabbage and stinking Benjamin had this trick for getting the jump on other plants. They bloomed even before the bees were up and about. So how did they get themselves pollinated? Easy, they gave off a smell like rotting meat and let the flies do the job.

Grundig figured his own trick was long hours and keeping away from the bottle until he was on his own time.

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That night after they'd watched a TV show on migrating birds and another on polar bears Grundig put the kids to bed. When his daughter and son-in-law got back from bowling and turned in, both having to get up early for work the next day, Grundig dragged the sofa bed open and sat on the corner of the mattress to watch the late-night news. It led off with the armored-car robbery. The Toad Hall manager had vanished. Now the police thought he was involved.

But Grundig didn't think that made sense. If the manager wanted to steal the receipts why didn't he just take them and run? Why risk an armed-robbery charge? And even if the armored car made other stops before it got to Toad Hall, would the extra money be worth it after he gave the two other guys their split? Grundig shook his head and waited for the weather. More snow.

The next morning Grundig sat with coffee and his lineup of pills watching the early news. The police had found the stolen armored car in a garage up an alley close to the robbed Toad Hall with two dead bodies inside, both shot. One was identified as the man who rented the garage. Neither was the cafeteria manager. The one million five that was supposed to be in the armored car was missing. Grundig whistled. How did it get to be one five? The police were watching the bus and train stations and the airport. The insurance company was offering a swell reward for information leading to the recovery of the money and the arrest of the criminals involved.

Private eyes would be crawling all over the place. Grundig wished he hadn't taken Mrs. Gowdy's case. He always liked to test himself against his younger associates. But only one case at a time was his cardinal rule.

Carlotta Timberlake's house was on a short, treed street, half of which, Carlotta's half, turned its back to an abandoned mall whose line of low two-story buildings Grundig could see between the houses. In the next block over he spied a Queen Anne with a tower covered with fish-scale shingles.

At the corner, a kid with a carton of milk stood waiting for the traffic light to change. As Grundig waited, too, he noticed something white like a kite or a plastic bag hung up in a tree between the corner and Carlotta's tower. After squinting at it, Grundig said, "Hey, son, give your old Cousin Weak-Eyes here a hand. What's that up there in that tree?"

"It's a balloon, sir." The boy looked back over his shoulder as he spoke. He was wearing a space alien Halloween mask.

Carlotta Timberlake was a tall woman with an upswept hairdo, a real Mutt to her sister's Jeff. Putting a coffee cup in front of him she smiled and said, "Sorry, my giggling back there, Mr. Aardvark.

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Gert's right. It's not like you chose your name. But look on the bright side. I'll bet it got you top spot in the yellow pages."

To redirect the conversation Grundig said, "I'd like to hear about this bread-truck robbery, Mrs. Timberlake."

"That was Saturday two weeks ago," she said. "I'd bundled up early and gone out back to watch the rosy-fingered dawn come creeping over the horizon. Ever do that yourself, Mr. Aardvark?" Then she giggled and said, "No, I'll bet you never did. Anyway, I'm smoking my first smoke of the day when I heard traffic turning into the old mall. Well, I've had a lot of trouble with kids gunning their engines, drag racing and doing wheelies over there. So I'm pretty good at staring them down. But when I went to the fence, to my surprise there was this Wunderlich Bread truck parked in front of the old Toad Hall place. This grim-faced guy wearing a Wunderlich Bread jacket was shouting orders to these two other guys who were prancing around behind Mr. Toad's statue. I thought maybe they were filming a Wunderlich Bread commercial. But I didn't see any camera.

"Anyway, when the driver was satisfied with the way the two other guys were handling themselves around the statue he goes over to the front door of the cafeteria, turns around like he's carrying a satchel, and comes back to the truck. He gets in and bolts right out again into the arms of his confederates like he'd been tear-gassed. Then they all stood around and had a smoke and talked.

"That's when the driver looked over and saw me watching. He gave me a long, hard look and for once it was me who got stared down."

"So after you saw the armored-car robbery on TV you called the police. What did they say?" asked Grundig.

"They weren't interested," she said.

Grundig was plodding though the snow in the Wunderlich Bread parking lot when he saw the old Volkswagen van. He might not have recognized it except for the flowers painted all over it, now faded to a uniform brown like blossoms pressed for remembrance between the pages of a book. He had to stop and look before he found the rose on the sliding side door where he'd painted it thirty-five years ago. Today it looked more like a brown cabbage. But it was his rose.

Grundig remembered the summer day at the beach when the whole private-eye crowd, everybody from the Roscoe and Fedora Club, a.k.a. the Gat and the Hat, turned out with beer and paintbrushes to decorate Autumn O'Kelly's new van. She was a private eye, too. But she wasn't a club member because the bylaws said no women need apply, that's how long ago it was. But everybody liked to have her around.

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When it came to tricks, Autumn's was a pair of blue eyes that made you think that she was your younger sister. She had long black hair and a trim little figure and she wore sandals and those loose dresses, what-do-you-call-'ems. But he could sure remember that afternoon when the painting was done and she took her dress off and walked out into the water with all of them standing there, half wanting to strip and go in after her, half ready to knock the tar out of anybody who tried, and nobody quite sure which half he belonged to.

Grundig had heard she was out Vancouver way. He was looking to see the license plate on the van when a woman's voice said, "Hey, Aardvark."

And there she was, a sight for Old Cousin Weak-Eyes. "Hey, Zebra," he said. She'd thickened up around the middle. The hair that poked out from under her wool baseball hat was gray now and her cheeks were slack and wrinkled, but when she laughed over the Zebra bit there was no doubt it was Autumn O'Kelly. She wore a red and white mackinaw jacket, sweatpants, and three-buckle galoshes.

She'd gotten into the business calling herself Zebra Investigations. As she explained it, she wanted to help the needy, people who'd run through the whole list of private detectives in the phone book before they got to her. "I wanted them to know it was a woman who solved their case when nobody else could."

"What's on the docket, Zebra?" asked Grundig.

"The armored-car robbery."

Grundig asked, "How come so much money?"

"The local Klinx franchise is a mom-and-pop operation," said Autumn. "Two armored cars. Day before yesterday one got rear-ended by a Wunderlich Bread truck. That left them with one armored car to make all the stops. The bread-truck driver fled the scene. He'd only been with the company a month. So I figure maybe it wasn't an accident. I'm trying to track him down. What brings you here?"

"A *Gaslight* case."

"Hey, making somebody think they're going crazy? You don't get much of that anymore in this crazy, crazy world of ours. Where does Wunderlich come in?"

"I'm not sure," admitted Grundig, and told her about the bread-truck business in the old mall.

"Looks like we're headed the same way," said Autumn. "Hop in. I got the Wunderlich driver's address, the one who skipped." When Grundig hesitated she said, "Better than hoofing it."

He got in. The van smelled of baby powder. There was a curtain right behind the front seats. Grundig suspected Autumn was living back there.

"So what's with the hoofing it?" she asked as she drove out of the parking lot. When he said he'd flunked the eyesight part of the driving test she nodded. "Well, it'll come to us all in time."

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"I don't mind it much," he said, "except remembering not to miss the last bus home."

"There's scotch in the glove compartment if you don't mind Old Pretender."

He shook his head. "Not on the job."

After a minute she asked, "Where is everybody?"

"Lummox Lomax dyed his hair, lied about his age, and works as a night watchman. Books Bascom passed away in his sleep in a chair at the public library. Manny Capabianco married Sweetheart. Remember her, his receptionist? She inherited this fleabag hotel and he runs it for her."

"I saw Pearly Gates a couple of nights ago."

"The Dying Channel, right?"

She kept her eyes on the road. "He shouldn't do stuff like that. It's like going over to the enemy."

"Character was never Pearly's strong suit," he said, adding, "So what's your plan for the reward money?"

Autumn laughed. "A house with a cat and a geranium in the window are looking pretty good about now. Crazy, right?"

"It's life," said Grundig. "Old Books used to say we all start off as originals and end up like everybody else."

Number 228 Rear was an apartment over a two-car garage behind a large house with a half-dozen electric meters like hydra heads on one side wall. As they pulled into the driveway a fat man came out of the house in stocking feet and leaned over the verandah railing. "Furn. apt. riv. vu?" he stuttered. When they looked blank he asked, "You here about the apartment over the garage? I'm McCann. I own the place."

Autumn explained that they were private investigators trying to locate Vincent White, a driver for Wunderlich Bread.

"White, who's he?" asked McCann, shifting from one stockinged foot to the other. "My man's Ronald Dwayne. He managed the Toad Hall that was robbed. He took off, it's been a good week now. That's why I put the ad in the paper. The police came by yesterday. They went through his place looking for leads. Didn't find squat."

"Could White have been his roomie?" asked Grundig.

The man shook his head. "I'd sure know about that. Want to check the place out? Come on in. I'll dig up the key."

McCann led them through the first door in the hallway into a living room that smelled of feet. He crossed to a desk with pigeonholes and drew out the key.

"My boy Dwayne was no big talker. Kept to himself. That was fine with me. Then one evening about ten days ago I saw his light and remembered how last fall at a yard sale I'd picked up this small kitchen table for his unit, put it in the back of my van with a lot of other stuff, and forgot about it. So I dug it out and brought it

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over. When I set it down on the kitchen floor I discovered it had a wobble. 'Hey, this needs a wobble-ectomy,' I told him. 'I'll get right on it.' 'Nah, it'll do fine,' he said. Easy enough for him to say since he was planning to skip out."

McCann handed over the key. "Just leave it on the sink when you're done," he said, and padded back out onto the porch with them. "You know, sometimes I think that's why they have them in yards."

"Have what?" asked Grundig.

"Yard sales," said McCann. "Because the ground's not level and they can sell off the wobbly stuff. There's a trick to everything."

Autumn and Grundig crossed the driveway to the apartment. She led the way up the stairs. He followed, deep in thought. The heat had been turned down so he kept his coat and hat on. While Autumn checked behind the cushions on the sofa for something the police might have overlooked Grundig went over to the window to sample the riv. vu. *Nice,* he thought.

"Not even carfare between the cushions," said Autumn.

Grundig turned from the window. "I guess this is where I get off. Looks like your boy and mine are one and the same. Toad Hall doesn't serve breakfast. He could have driven a bread truck, too. That answers the *Gaslight* part of things. Carlotta Timberlake saw him and his pals rehearsing the armored-car robbery at the old mall. He saw her see them. So he set out to discredit her. Come robbery time the police weren't taking her seriously anymore. So all I got to do is write it up and send my client her bill. Case closed."

"Congratulations," said Autumn as she went to check out the bedroom.

"So maybe I'll take you up on that drink now."

"Be my guest," she called back.

Grundig went down the stairs to the sound of dresser drawers being opened and closed. Outside, the snow had started up again. He got the Old Pretender from the van and returned to the apartment. Autumn was checking out the bathroom. He heard her replacing the lid on the commode tank. He found a glass in the kitchen cupboard. There was no ice. The day before yesterday was garbage pickup and the refrigerator had been emptied and turned off. But it hadn't been cleaned out and smelled vaguely of rotting meat.

Grundig sat down at the kitchen table and poured two fingers of scotch into the glass. The refrigerator smell made him think of the trick the early wildflowers used to draw the flies. And what had what's-his-name the landlord said, how the trick to selling wobbly secondhand furniture was to take it to a yard sale?

Grundig frowned. He lifted his drink in one hand and gave the table a shake with the other. It sat solidly enough. Had the landlord gotten around to fixing it? He looked beneath the table and found a match folder under one of the table legs. He pulled it out. The cover said "For Our Matchless Friends from the Folks at the Cozy Motel."

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Grundig heard Autumn coming back, muttering to herself. He replaced the match folder and straightened up. This was her case, not his. He was going to have to play things very carefully. Private eyes have big egos.

He had just made the terrible face that the first slug of Old Pretender made you make when Autumn came into the kitchen, shaking her head. "The guy sure knows how to cover his tracks," she said and sat down at the table. "I don't know where to go from here." She leaned forward on her elbows, deep in thought.

"You know," tried Grundig, "if I was this Dwayne character I'd be long gone. Rio's nice this time of year."

"Maybe," said Autumn sceptically. "But if he's as smart as I think he is he might just find himself a place to hunker down in town until things blow over."

Grundig pretended to think about that. "Sounds good," he said at last.

His heart rose when Autumn straightened up, put her hands on the table, and gave it a gentle shake. "Looks like Mr. McCann got around to his wobble-ectomy," she said and went back to her thinking.

After a moment Grundig turned toward the window as if to admire the riv. vu. again, pushing a mitten onto the floor as he did and pretending not to notice.

Autumn reached down absently, picked it up, and set it back on the table. Then she brightened, ducked her head under the table again, and came up with the match folder. "Damn, look at this," she said.

He turned back from the window, took the match folder, and squinted at it. "Lord almighty," he said. "The Cozy Motel. I think that's over near Carlotta Timberlake's neck of the woods. You better trot this down to the police station pronto."

Maybe he hit the "Lord almighty" too hard, for she gave him a curious look. "Maybe we should both go," she said.

He shook his head and stood up. In the private-eye business you don't eat off another guy's plate. "We passed a bus stop two corners over on our way in. That'll do me fine. Business before pleasure. I've still got my report to Mrs. Gowdy to write up."

At the bus stop Grundig got out of the van and turned back to say, "Good luck with the geranium sweepstakes, Zebra."

"Goodbye, Aardvark. You're still a gent," she said, and drove away.

Grundig stood there watching her go. What she said set him wondering if being a gent had been his trick all along. He'd never thought of that before. "Well, a guy could do worse," he told himself. Then, throwing his old shoulders back, he turned the other way and peered through the snow to see if his bus was coming. ●

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The Smoking Gun of Elizabeth Henze

by Michael Collins

Elizabeth Henze is born in a small town near Amarillo, Texas, in 1960, seven years after Fred Henze comes home from Korea. She is the last of Fred and Hildy Henze's children, and the only girl.

Korea was Fred's second war. He made the mistake of remaining in the reserve after returning from World War II, which he still calls the "real" war. For most of that first war, Hildy Henze operated a lathe in an Amarillo defense plant. She liked working, was not happy when the men returned and took back their jobs. She never did anything about it. It was so much easier to live the life everyone agreed was the way it was supposed to be. But she never forgot those war years, and whenever she read about a successful career woman, she would say that could have been her, and that it would be different for her daughter.

From the day Elizabeth is born, Hildy tells her that a girl should have a career, be independent, and go as high and far as any boy. When it comes to a career, Hildy tells her daughter, to achievement and recognition, a girl should be no different from a boy. But, she warns, a girl must try harder. Hildy insists Elizabeth take all the same classes the boys do in grammar and high school, badgers Fred to teach her everything he teaches her brothers about math and business and investing. Elizabeth proves to be smarter than the boys, and far more ambitious, but she is a normal teenager, and wants to belong, be like everyone else, so she also learns to dance, twirl, and dress to make the boys look at her.

In high school she learns for the first time that her mother was

This, sadly, is probably the last Michael Collins story *EQMM* will be featuring. The author, whose real name was Dennis Lynds, was a great friend of this magazine and its editors. He passed away this past summer, and unless further manuscripts are found with his effects, his P.I. Dan Fortune will be seen no more in stories. For a write-up on this seminal author see p. 47.

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right, a girl has disadvantages, the playing field is not level. She also learns a great deal her mother and father did not teach her, from her girlfriends and television and movies and popular novels and the teachers and Bobby Travis. The one thing she wants but has not achieved by junior year is to be editor of the school newspaper. The faculty advisor, Mr. Birch, can choose anyone from the staff or even from outside to be editor. But everyone knows that if last year's managing editor was a junior he becomes editor in his senior year. When Elizabeth is a junior, Bobby Travis is a senior and the editor. A tall, handsome boy who has his own car and looks good in jeans and boots and a black Stetson.

"If you make me managing editor, Bobby, Mr. Birch'll make me editor next year. I'll be a good editor, Bobby."

"Hey, I don't know, Liz. I mean, we never had a girl editor on the paper. Hell, not even a girl managing editor."

"I'm the best reporter and editor, and you know it."

Bobby grins. "For a girl."

"For anyone," she says flatly. "And that means you, Bobby Travis. I know more and I write better than anyone."

"Maybe," he says, and his grin is different. "But what else can you do? I mean, a girl's got to try harder, right?"

They are in a booth at the coffee shop after school. They have taken a break from the newspaper, are all but alone. Bobby Travis seems very aware of this, still has that different grin. Elizabeth is equally aware of being alone with him. She is aware of his different grin, and of what she and her girlfriends have often talked about.

"What do you want me to do, Bobby?"

"Hey, I mean, I got to get something out of it, right, Liz?"

Elizabeth thinks about it, and realizes that a girl *is* different from a boy even in career and recognition. A girl has many disadvantages, yes, but she also has certain advantages. Even an edge if these advantages are used properly, and under the right conditions. Elizabeth becomes managing editor.

When Bobby Travis graduates, and Mr. Birch isn't sure a girl should be editor, she convinces him the way she convinced Bobby Travis. Her position as editor, with all her other activities, gets her elected student-body president and class president, and she sails into the University of Texas on a good-citizen scholarship from the Lion's Club, another for achievers with limited means from the American Legion, and is instantly flagged as a freshman to watch.

"She knew way before I did that I'd never leave Amarillo. Down at TU she says to me, 'I like you a lot, Bobby, but in life we move on. The land of opportunity.'"

I found Robert O. Travis drinking Jack Daniels over ice on the terrace of a country club on Amarillo's eastern edge. He stared at my missing arm.

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"Vietnam?"

"Frostbite," I told him. "Prospecting in Alaska."

He looked suspicious that I was somehow insulting him, but remembered who he was, and dismissed such an absurd thought. The terrace bordered the first tee and eighteenth green, and I soon learned he was first vice-president of the local bank founded by his great-grandfather, where his father was still president and chairman, and where he had worked all his life since college. He had thickened around the middle, acquired that aura of idle flabbiness endemic to the sons and grandsons of important men in small cities, and had never forgotten Elizabeth Henze. He took a drink of the Jack and stared out across the final green toward all those years ago in the land of opportunity.

"She ever get into serious trouble in high school? Drugs, sex, cheating, anything?"

He looked at my card again: *Daniel Fortune, Private Investigations.* "She in some kind of trouble?"

"Under indictment in California for fraud, embezzlement, and grand theft."

He took a drink. "You don't say."

A gaudy foursome was approaching the final green.

"What can you tell me about J. James?"

"Some kind of financial genius, 'cordin' to the *Wall Street Journal.* In hot water right now."

"A genius to a lot of people," I agreed. "A crook to a lot of others, including the U. S. government."

"Which side you working for?"

"The side says he's a crook."

"And you figure to tie Liz up with him?"

"She's tied up to him, all right. The only question is how."

Travis finished his Jack Daniels, waved for the waiter to bring another round. "You want me to help you find that out? Send her down with this James guy?"

"Anything you might have. Letters. Rumors. Anything her family might have told you."

He contemplated his glass. "Lost touch with Liz the day she left TU. Everyone in Amarillo did, even her brothers. Like I said, she knew none of us'd ever get out of Amarillo." There was a wistfulness of what might have been in his voice that was also endemic to the sons and grandsons of important men in small towns.

We watched the gaudy foursome make hash of easy putts. When I'd finished my ale, and the foursome had headed for the locker room arguing about who owed who money, I got up to leave.

Travis signaled for another Jack Daniels. "You know somethin' funny? She *was* the best writer and editor we had, bar none."

At TU, Elizabeth soon learns that money is important for anyone

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who wants to make an impression. Her scholarships, while adequate for her needs, will not pay for what it takes to get noticed, so she goes to work part-time for a BusAd professor who runs a co-op, and a biology professor who moonlights as a consultant. As a sophomore she majors in BusAd, does an internship at a local investment firm, and meets Mark Todd.

Two years older, Mark Anthony Todd is from another small Texas town. Taller, blonder, and handsomer than Bobby Travis, jeans, boots, and a Stetson that look even better on him than they did on Bobby Travis. He has much better shoulders. He also has charm and ambition, is a big man on campus in theater, a top student in aerospace engineering, and a fellow investment intern.

Elizabeth signs up for theater. She auditions and is cast in the first show: *Sweet Bird of Youth.* Mark Todd is the star. He has a steady girl, but he soon notices Elizabeth. Most men do. She has worked on that.

"You don't have a lot of talent, but you have a real stage presence," Mark Todd tells her. "Charisma."

"We look good together," she says. "You need a tall woman."

"I'm just about engaged."

"That's too bad. I'm free and footloose."

It is no contest. The girl who has followed him to TU from his home high school can give him all the usual, but she is not in Elizabeth's league. In charm, ambition, and sheer drive, Elizabeth and Mark are a match, the golden couple. Mark succumbs before that first play closes. He senses even then that she is much smarter than he is, but they make a dazzling couple, and that is all he needs at the time.

It is Elizabeth's idea to write a theater-movie column for the campus newspaper that is soon picked up by some local weeklies, shopping guides, and "Things to Do" booklets in motels. They soon learn that a series of plugs for the attractions at specific theaters will be rewarded by grateful exhibitors. Even less frequent plugs will earn them free tickets they can sell on the side. They do well, bank the money.

Mark convinces his father to pay for one more year and a master's degree, but even then he will finish a year before Elizabeth. His father expects him to go to California and an excellent job in a large aerospace company. Mark agrees on California, but it isn't aerospace he and Elizabeth have in mind. Not at first, anyway. He will always have the engineering to fall back on, but the movies and TV are where the big bucks are, and in those youth counts.

"Go for broke, right?" he says. "Hollywood, here I come."

"Hollywood, here *we* come," she says.

"Hey, you've got a year to be the big star here, finish your B.A." He is earnest. "Why don't I go ahead, set things up. Get a pad, an agent, some contacts. Then you come out as soon as you graduate."

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"No way, José. You go nowhere without me, buster."

"You don't trust me!"

"Not out of my sight. When you storm Lotus Land, can Liz be far behind?"

He laughs. "I never really figured it any other way."

"Good. You'll live longer. We'll get married right after commencement, and be in the air by noon."

They are in the air by noon—first class, with the good wishes of the Drama Department. (They cash in the tickets they got from each set of parents. That increases the substantial "loan" they have from the same parents, and all they managed to save from their enterprises while at TU.) They have the stake, the names of former TU drama students who are working on the Coast, and an introduction and recommendation from the director-in-residence to his agent.

They are on their way to Hollywood. The golden couple.

Austin is a handsome city of trees and lakes at the edge of the hill country of Central Texas. A dignified town, as befits the state capital and home of the campus of the University of Texas. My first stop was the office of Rudolph Baum in a corner of the Business Administration Building. He did not want to talk about Elizabeth Henze.

"She was reasonably competent, as I recall, nothing special."

"What made you hire her?"

"She seemed more eager than most applicants, and, as I said, reasonably competent."

"Not because of how she looked? She didn't come on to you?"

He flushed angrily. "I'm a married man, Mr. Fortune. A professor. She was a student, and a freshman at that. I would have fired her on the spot."

"And you don't know anything about her recent relationship with J. James?"

"I've had no contact with her since she left the university." A bitterness tinged his voice. "I wish I did have something to help you convict her."

I had a feeling he meant it. Whatever memories he had of Elizabeth Henze were not pleasant ones.

Jorge Medina, the biology professor with the consulting business, told me why when he met me in his laboratory. "That's because Rudy had fantasies of a great romance. Offered to leave his wife if Liz'd marry him. Poor Rudy."

We were in his laboratory where he had been joking with four of his grad students as I came in. He sent them back to work on the research for his next scientific paper, and sat on the edge of a lab bench to talk to me.

"How about you?" I asked.

"No way," he laughed. "I never even tried. She did my books, knew exactly how much I was making in my side business, and

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told me all about Rudy. We were 'pals.' Professors in Austin were not what she had in mind. Academia isn't where the spotlight falls, or where the rich and famous play."

"She wanted the rich life?"

"Who doesn't? It's what we're all taught to want, isn't it?"

"She ever do anything illegal while she worked for you and your clients?"

That was when his face closed down. "Why are you so interested in Liz?"

"I'm not," I told him. "The lawyers for all the small investors James's company fleeced of their life savings are."

"They think Elizabeth was part of the scheme?"

"So do I. All I have to do is prove it."

"Ah." He nodded, and then shook his head. "I don't think I can help you."

I heard not denial in his voice but conviction. "Can't or won't?"

He smiled. "There was something wonderful about her. Her inventiveness and eagerness and desire to conquer our world."

"She's not so wonderful now."

"Perhaps that's because the world we gave her wouldn't let her be."

In Los Angeles, Elizabeth and Mark put a down payment on a house in Studio City once owned by Steve McQueen. They buy a five-year-old Mercedes and a three-year-old Porsche. The agent approves—image is everything—and suggests lessons, coaches, and a lot of new clothes. They make friends through the former TU actors. The agent sends them on calls, Elizabeth lands a few small TV parts, Mark gets a screen test. The test is not a success, but the agent goes out on a limb to get him a featured role in a big TV movie. He bombs, and must be replaced. He has no real talent. Elizabeth has some, but not much. Neither comes across on film.

They run out of money after a year and a half. Mark gets a job with an aerospace subcontractor in Van Nuys. Elizabeth finds an opening in a biological consulting firm doing much the same work as the professor at TU. Their combined pay covers the mortgage, taxes, car payments, and food. Not much more. Their agent tells them that if they are to break through in Hollywood, they must go on with the high life they're living to maintain their image and expand their connections.

Mark is arrested for stealing from his boss, who, as bad luck would have it, is a wheeler and dealer skating on the edge himself, is a shade paranoid, and quickly spots Mark's skimming. Because he is white, married, college-educated, and a homeowner with no previous record, he is given a fine and probation. But now Mark can't find a job in aerospace; the only extra work Elizabeth can get is secretarial work. Small Equity-waiver stage parts bring in no money.

Three years after they left Austin, a friend suggests a quick mari-

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juana score, supplies them with good Mexican pot. Mark soon makes the mistake of selling a lid to a federal undercover agent at a big Hollywood party. They are still white, a couple, college-educated, own their own home, but he is also on probation, so this time he is sentenced to two to five years. Elizabeth, as a first offender, gets a year plus. With their age and background they do their time in minimum-security prisons, and Elizabeth is paroled in six months.

The house is gone and the cars. The agent has dropped them, most of their friends have vanished. The friend who supplied the pot feels a little guilty, likes Elizabeth, and arranges for her to sublet a nice condo in Brentwood. A few old TU grads get her some small bits on TV.

When Mark is paroled after eighteen months, they decide their best option is for him to head East where he is not known. He conceals his past, and lands a good job at another aerospace company. He sends her all the money he can, doesn't tell her he's living in a dump and eating at McDonald's. But he admits to being lonely and wants to come back to L.A. She tells him she wants that too, but that she is barely surviving with the money he sends and can't maintain any kind of image without it. Mark promises to send her more money, and a few months later is arrested again for embezzlement, and takes another two-to-five hit.

Elizabeth is now alone and essentially broke, and has to move to a small apartment court in West Hollywood. She knows now she is never going to make it in show business. She knows she must think about the future, toys with the idea of going back to college to finish her B.A., but decides she is already too old to go that slow route, and thinks about who among all her L.A. acquaintances might offer a faster way. That is when she remembers Mark's old aerospace boss, the wheeler-dealer who had him arrested the first time. Remembers the way he stared at her all through Mark's trial.

With the help of TU friends she contrives to run into him at a Beverly Hills party given by another TU grad. He is more than pleased to see her again, has often wondered what happened to her after he had to charge Mark.

"Don't ask." She smiles.

"I'm not surprised," the ex-boss, whose name is Eric Martin, says. "Mark's a loser, he always will be. Small-time. You're better than that. Where is he now?"

"Back East in jail."

"Christ!" He shakes his head. "How did you ever get mixed up with him?"

"It seemed a good idea at the time."

"I suppose it did. But things change, and if you're as smart as I think you are, you look for new horizons."

"Did you have some specific horizon in mind?"

"Let's talk about it over dinner."

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A month later she moves into Eric Martin's big house in Sherman Oaks. He buys her Porsche back for her. When Mark gets out of jail and writes to say he thinks he has a job in Atlanta where they need his skills enough to not care about his record, she says how happy she is for him, but she can't come to Georgia, and maybe it would be best to get a divorce. He calls and is sad, protests mildly, but it is clear that under it all he is relieved. Their life, the big ambition, has worn him down. Besides, he has met a woman in Atlanta, and, well, "Hey, I hope you hit it big, Elizabeth, real big."

"And I hope you get everything you want, Mark," she says, and means it. In a different world, at another time, they might have been happy.

The theater owner put me off until the next day. I checked into the best hotel in Austin, had a few cold Sierra Nevada ales in the bar, and called John Jeffries. Lead lawyer for the fleeced investors, he was not pleased.

"Nothing?"

"Only the slap on the wrist for the drug bust."

"She can make that look like all her first husband's idea."

"That's all there is, John. Sorry."

"Damn it, Dan, she and James swindled thousands of poor bastards out of their life savings. She's living high in Beverly Hills on more than her smile."

Next morning, the movie man relaxed in the comfort of his own theater. "Best two years' business I ever had. Okay, so I slipped them some extra bucks under the table to keep 'em away from the competition, and they skimmed the tickets. It was worth it, I made out like a bandit. A smart cookie, that girl. Nobody's made a go of anything like it around here since."

I jumped on it. "Can you prove it was all her idea?"

"You mean in court? Hell, no. On paper, everything was in both their names."

"Did you keep in touch with either of them after they left Austin?"

He shook his head. "But if you see the girl, tell her she can come back to work for me anytime."

Elizabeth Todd becomes Elizabeth Martin in the high-roller world of Eric Martin. The aerospace company in Van Nuys is only a part of his holdings. There are pieces of two more engineering firms, a low-rent real-estate empire where his marginal and illegal tenants don't complain about violations or rats; chancy but highly profitable investments in the chimeric universe of Hollywood; and even a minority stake in a pair of hotel-casinos in Las Vegas.

He tentatively suggests he bring her into his business. She demurs, points out that his business is very much hands-on, and based on his personal reputation. She would only water down that

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trust. He is relieved, he didn't really want a partner, and decides to make her his office manager. She learns all about the world of deals, kickbacks, inflated estimates, padded accounts, shrewd lawyers, and how to take care of important contacts. She learns the angles. There are good and bad days, but Eric Martin always wins more than he loses, and his holdings and bank account expand.

She loves the comforts and perks, but mostly the rarefied air of being in the know, of making the world work for her benefit. Having and taking. Everything you want. And there is the flaw, the rub: In the world of play hard and loose, and a little over the edge if necessary, to want is to need. For the Eric Martins and Elizabeth Henzes too much is never enough.

Some years pass. Mark Todd reappears in L.A. with Norberg Dynamics, the aerospace giant, who also doesn't care about his past mistakes. He calls Elizabeth, there are no hard feelings. Mark has his Georgia girl in tow, and, after Eric Martin learns that Mark's job includes awarding contracts to subcontractors, the couples see quite a bit of each other. Mark is, of course, wary. But Eric is persuasive. If you don't take every angle, you get left behind. With a little "unofficial" help from Elizabeth, a deal is struck.

Mark will award contracts to Eric's aerospace companies at a price lower than Eric would charge on the open market. Eric will inflate costs and expenses, but not excessively. There will be "problems" and "delays." Vital but costly "changes." All the extra profit these engender will be split with Mark. A sweet deal, and the padding will be so restrained Norberg will never notice.

Alas, unknown to them, Norberg is under pressure to cut costs from a Pentagon that is itself under pressure from new faces on Capitol Hill, and spots the fraud. By now Mark has learned a few things about how it's done, so he quickly cooperates. When the dust clears, Eric Martin ends up going away for ten years. Mark gets off with three, one suspended.

Elizabeth appears nowhere on the books, has no legal part in the deal, and cannot be charged. So what she gets from the disaster, California being a community-property state, is fifty percent of Eric's entire estate in her divorce proceeding.

The California Men's Colony stands on the outskirts of San Luis Obispo, close to where the Cuesta Grade and the horseshoe curves of the Southern Pacific Railroad cut through the coast mountains. Passengers on Amtrak's Coast Starlight to Seattle look directly down into the exercise yard of the minimum-security prison.

In the visitors' room, Eric Martin snarls, "If I knew anything about what she was doing with James besides screwing him, I'd tell you, believe me."

He had obviously not come to any kind of adjustment to prison. A jailhouse lawyer, the warden told me, a troublemaker who was on

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track to serving his full sentence. A whiner and complainer, outraged every second that a man of his stature had to live in such a place. "I'd give a year's pay to transfer him to Soledad," the warden told me, "but Sacramento won't let me. It's a white-collar world."

Martin glared at me. "There's a lot of money involved?"

"A lot of money," I agreed. "But he already had a wife somewhere, no community property."

"Then she got the bucks some other way, believe me."

"No one's been able to find anything except what she made on the investments he put her into, including his own company. But all that's legal."

He scowled. "I thought James's company was selling phantom stocks and running a pyramid scheme."

"That's what the Feds convicted him for after it all collapsed and he skipped. But she doesn't appear anywhere on his books except as an early investor."

I thought he would have a stroke on the spot. "That bitch! She played me. She had it all worked out from the start! 'Don't make me part of your business, dear, it's you they trust.' If anything went wrong, she was in the clear. Damn her. A wife's supposed to help her husband, not go into the marriage covering her ass and fixing to bail if the going gets rough."

The week was getting longer every second.

In an American movie someone once said, "To go from zero to a million dollars is hard work. To go from a million to ten million is inevitable."

Eric Martin and Mark Todd in prison, Elizabeth is now financially secure, but she is not wealthy, and the spotlight does not shine on her. She doesn't play with the rich and famous, still drives herself. She begins to make fairly large charitable donations, inquire about investment brokers, and accept invitations to parties in Beverly Hills, Pasadena, and Palm Springs. It isn't too long before she meets J. James, Esq., *Financial Advice, Investment Opportunity.*

Gray-haired, distinguished, considerably older than Mark Todd and even Eric Martin, smooth as cream and sharp as Saladin's scimitar. Banker's pinstripe and black shoes shined to a high polish. The pink face of a barber shave every day. A man who counsels. Advises. Allows you to share his financial knowledge and acumen.

"I don't usually take on individual accounts, Mrs. Martin, but I will make an exception in your case, and also offer you a position in my new company."

"What new company?"

"J. James and Company. I have finally been persuaded to offer my experience and modest knowledge to the public. At least, to that part of it with equity to invest in an extremely high-yield but high-risk investment. Ordinarily high-risk, that is. With what I

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have in mind, the yield will remain high while the risk will diminish to all but nothing. Does it sound like it will attract people?"

"Like flies. If you can convince them, and if it isn't too illegal."

J. James laughs. "You are the perfect woman for the job, my dear. I sensed it from the moment I heard of you, and I am only more certain now that I've met you."

"What do I do?"

"You will be my investment executive. We will operate coast-to-coast, but concentrate on Southern California for now. There should be enough equity here to keep us busy for the first few years while we shake out the inevitable kinks."

"You've checked my background? Experience?"

"Indeed I have." J. James smiles. "Indeed I have."

She smiles too. "Then I accept. But only as your private client and close friend. Sort of a goodwill ambassador. No direct connection to your company."

James's smile broadens. "I think that can be arranged, my dear."

It is the big time for Elizabeth Henze from the small town near Amarillo, Texas. She takes to this new world as if she's waited for it all her life. Which, of course, she has. Houses in Indian Wells, Telluride, and the Hamptons. A Los Angeles condo in a high rise convenient to the financial center. Limousines. A company jet. Offices and rented mansions in La Jolla, Montecito, Coronado, Malibu, wherever and whenever needed. Country clubs, tennis clubs, and yacht clubs. Seminars and investment luncheons. Parties and cruises and private beach houses. Political campaigns on behalf of those candidates favorable to investment and growth.

Not marriage; he has an estranged wife who refuses to divorce him, but she is a big girl, and what J. James offers her coast-to-coast is enough.

Feature articles in *The San Diegan, California Magazine.* A financial advice series in *Forbes,* a roundup article in *Fortune.* An interview in *Vanity Fair.* Constant mentions in *People.* Interviews on *Good Morning America* and *The Today Show.* A three-part feature in *Ms.* The new successful woman.

Fred and Hildy Henze, back in the small town near Amarillo, are a little bewildered by all that has happened to their only daughter, but they smile for the cameras and say, "We're real proud of our Liz."

Except for the enclaves of the truly wealthy, Orange County was a giant housing tract of varying levels of middle-class affluence set in a landscape of strip malls, storefronts, and wide, sterile boulevards where no one walked. But change was in the air. For the first time Orange had a majority made up of ethnic minorities. Little Saigon would soon be joined by Little Bangkok, Little Beijing, and Little Bombay, and the Balboa Yacht Club would never

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be the same.

Mark Todd, out of jail some years, was now consulting freelance for small aerospace contractors while running a TV talent agency and acting class in Anaheim. The Georgia girl had decamped, saying she couldn't compete with a memory, and he was alone at the dim midafternoon sports bar near Disneyland watching Elizabeth Henze Todd Martin on TV when I sat down on the next stool.

"Tell me about her and J. James."

He nodded toward the TV and smiled, both fondness and admiration in his voice. "Isn't she something?"

"She's something," I agreed.

He continued to watch the screen. Elizabeth was talking to reporters on the steps of the federal courthouse in L.A. "A travesty, Karl, what else can you call these ridiculous charges? First they malign poor Jimmy over some unfortunate reverses in his business, and force him to leave the country to escape their lies, and now they want to put me in jail without a shred of evidence."

A woman TV reporter pushed her microphone into Elizabeth's face. "Can you tell us what you told the court?"

"What could I tell them, Sandra? I was merely a friend and ambassador eager to spread the word of such a great opportunity for those who would otherwise never be able to enter the world of higher finance where the greatest rewards are. I still feel the same, and don't believe a word of what they say Jimmy did. They simply need to blame someone for what was plain misfortune, turned into disaster by the panic of inexperienced investors."

"The U. S. attorney says you and James were partners."

"Well," a dazzling smile, and a small laugh, "perhaps in one sense, my dear, but that is no one's concern but my own. I knew nothing of the details of his business." Another small, self-deprecating laugh. "I'm afraid I'm a poor role model for the modern woman, but I've always been content to leave business and finance matters to my men. And I'll tell you that, no matter what others claim, Jimmy's advice and counsel made a great deal of money for me."

On that note she ended the interview, and was helped into the rear of a black limousine to be whisked regally away.

"Liz always liked limos," Mark Todd said, smiling at the screen.

"What about her claim to have known nothing of the nuts and bolts of James's operation?"

He thought about it for a time. "When me and Martin got busted she could have testified the scheme was all Martin's idea and maybe got me off the hook. But that would have shown she knew all about the caper, and sent her to prison again." He took a long pull of his Red Tail. "That answer your question?"

"Yet you still love her, don't you?"

He stared into his ale, and then shrugged. "What's that got to do with the price of cheese? I'll always love her, and maybe she'll always

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love me. But love just got in the way of everything we ever learned."

The adobe hacienda built by Pedro Ibarra, a Spanish shepherd boy who ran off to Mexico in the middle of the eighteenth century, still stands behind the Montecito mansion of retired stockbroker Harold Ibarra Jones. Sometime along the path from a shepherd's hut in Castile to Alta California, Pedro became *Don* Pedro, with lands stretching from modern Santa Barbara to modern Santa Maria.

The mansion itself was built in 1847 by Morgan Jones, a Welsh-American adventurer who made a fortune dealing, or some said stealing, horses and hides. He married Alicia Maria Ibarra, and inherited part of the *ranchero* where today Mixtecs from distant Oaxaca have replaced the local Indians and Mexicans to care for the remaining two or three hundred acres Harold Jones lives on in baronial comfort.

The barony was inherited; the comfort came from Harold's forays in the stock market. Forays that eventually landed him in prison charged with insider trading, price manipulation, falsifying records, filing false reports, racketeering, and defrauding customers. He pleaded guilty to a handful of minor securities violations, was fined a few hundred million dollars of the billions he had pocketed, sentenced to ten years in prison—of which he served 18 months.

That was all I knew about Jones when I drove through the high iron gates of the *ranchero.* What I didn't know was why Elizabeth Henze had told me to meet her there if I wanted to talk. But once through the dense screen of trees that hid the mansion, I saw the tents, pavilions, flower-decked arbor, and long linen-covered tables set up in the shade of oaks and Brazilian pepper trees. I didn't have to see the tall ten-tiered cake in the dining room to know a wedding was being prepared, or read the printed program to guess who the happy couple were.

Elizabeth Henze waved me to a comfortable modern designer armchair in the cool and sunny sitting room, its French doors wide open onto an inner patio.

I said, "My congratulations to both of you."

"Thank you," she said, and laughed aloud. A carefree laugh. "You don't mean that for a second, Mr. Fortune, but that's fair enough."

I studied her where she sat on a white modern-art couch, and realized I had been carrying in my mind a picture of her as a steely young woman with quick, sharp eyes looking for an advantage that could be exploited. She was none of those things. Tall, her long legs crossed in sleek gray slacks, she wore a pale beige blouse that set off her perfectly groomed dark hair. There was no jewelry beyond a large emerald and diamond engagement ring, and her dark brown eyes were more amused than anything else. She had acquired the style, poise, and confidence that comes with

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the privileges status and money buy in our world.

"Kind of sudden, isn't it?" I said.

"You never know when love will strike." She smiled. "Perhaps you'd like to come to the wedding? You probably know me better than Harold does by now."

"Too much pomp, too many bangles, too many cameras."

"A man of the people," she said with an edge of mockery.

I suppose, in a way, I deserved the mockery.

"You were as much a part of the whole scheme as James was."

Her smile did not change. "You know, and I know. The U.S. Attorney knows and the FBI. Your lawyers know. The problem is that little annoyance called proof. A paper trail, a money trail, an evidence trail."

I nodded. "How did you get James to go for it? I mean, he's left holding the whole bag."

"He knew if it went wrong too soon it would all come down on him. I was his insurance policy. He'd pay his debt to society, I'd have plenty of legitimate money, and we'd live happily ever after."

I glanced out through the French doors at wedding preparations on the patio. "Doesn't look to me like his 'insurance' is going to pay off."

"That was the risk *he* took." There was neither irony nor sympathy in her voice.

Outside on the patio a scrub jay complained. "Doesn't any of it bother you? Bobby Travis, Mark Todd, Eric Martin? The ruined lives? The murders?"

"We all took our chances, and I have no idea what you mean by murders."

"Six suicides, a dozen heart attacks, and no telling how many shortened lives because of you and James. You killed them as sure as if you'd used a gun."

Her smile was still untroubled. "I used the system. I learned how it worked, and I used it. They could have done the same thing. It's hardly my fault they didn't."

She sat there with her smile and her sense of entitlement, of what was her due. An aura of aristocracy, above the mundane, untouchable.

Jeffries scowled out the window of his Los Angeles office. "For God's sake, I send you out after a smoking gun, and you bring me her life story."

"Her life story," I said, "*is* the smoking gun."

After a time he sighed, and swiveled back to look at me. "We're not going to win this one, are we, Dan?"

"No, counselor," I said. "I don't think we are." ●

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Dennis Lynds Remembered

by Gayle Lynds

Seldom does an author change a genre once, let alone twice. It humbles me to know that Den, my wonderful husband, is credited with bringing the detective novel into the modern age in the late 1960s and early 1970s, then twenty years later introducing literary techniques that propelled it into its current dynamic form.

A titanic intellect and talent, he wrote under several pseudonyms, publishing some eighty novels and two hundred short stories, many of the latter in the pages of *EQMM*. As Michael Collins, his most famous pen name, he created the indelible P.I. Dan Fortune, the star of one of the longest-running of all private-eye series. The first book in that series, *Act of Fear,* became a best first novel Edgar winner. According to *Private Eyes: 101 Knights* by Robert Baker and Michael Nietzel, "Many critics believe Dan Fortune to be the culmination of a maturing process that transformed the private eye from the naturalistic Spade (Dashiell Hammett) through the romantic Marlowe (Raymond Chandler) and the psychological Archer (Ross Macdonald) to the sociological Fortune (Michael Collins)."

From his youth, Den also published literary stories—five of which were honored in *Best American Short Stories*—and mainstream novels. In the late 1980s, his second period of pioneering work in the detective form began, when he introduced into his detective novels the sort of literary techniques he'd been using in his other work—such as creating novels alternating first- and third-person points of view, and lacing short stories into his books. "Powerful and memorable," wrote critic Richard C. Carpenter in *Twentieth Century Crime and Mystery Writers.* "[These works] indicate Collins has embarked on a new course after some sixty books. Truly, he is a writer to be reckoned with." Den's experiments have now become commonplace techniques in crime fiction.

Over the course of his career, Den was nominated for many prizes and received the PWA's Lifetime Achievement Award and the Marlowe Lifetime Achievement Award. In its yearly round-up, The *New York Times* consistently named his books among the top ten mysteries in the nation. One year, it included two of his pseudonymous titles in the top ten, without realizing that he was the author of both. More recently, in regard to the story collection *Fortune's World*, the *L.A. Times* commented, "To spin tales as intriguing and thought provoking as these for three decades is a remarkable enough achievement. Even more remarkable is the sustained quality. . . . It takes style to bring that off. Bravery, too, of course."

This issue's Michael Collins story was one of the last Den created and the first to be published since his death on August 19, 2005, at the age of 81. He was iconoclastic, witty, and generous. He would have loved the many notes from readers saying he will be missed.

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Art by Mark Evan Walker

DEAR ETHICIST

by Ruth Francisco

A body floated in still quarry water.

The abyss was two hundred feet deep, chiseled out of granite like the excavation site for a city high-rise. Red and orange maples, poplar, and hemlock vaulted above the spring-filled pit. The water looked black and thick as ink. Green moss clung to the jagged sides, and the chilled, still air smelled of decay. A scrim of ice formed around the edges, crystallized into thin geometric shards. Dead wet leaves frosted white looked like candied fruit dusted with sugar.

A bitter organic smell clung to the rising mist, somewhat metallic, like the smell of blood.

The body floated faceup, gently tapping the edge of the quarry as if moved by respiration. Its skin was white and rubbery, its bulging white eyes reflecting the clouds above. Water bugs skittered across the water surface daintily as if afraid to touch.

It seemed to belong there.

©2006 by Ruth Francisco

As Bernard Pezzetti slid onto his favorite stool at Plato's Cafe, he slapped his yet-unread copies of the *New York Times* and the

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Ragley Sentinel on the yellow pine breakfast bar.

Generally, Professor Pezzetti preferred to patronize places where truckers and local laborers—not the college crowd—hung out. Yet he felt morally compelled to support any cafe that competed with the Starbucks down the street. Often he bought a dozen of Ellen's cranberry bran, cardamom apple, and banana pumpkin muffins to take to his honors class in political ethics at Ragley College. Occasionally he held seminars in the cafe. What could be more appropriate than holding spontaneous symposia at Plato's Cafe?

Says author James Lee Burke of Ruth Francisco: "Her talent is enormous . . . each of her scenes is like a perfect painting . . . I can't remember when I first read a writer of such immense ability. I think she's probably a major literary figure in the making." The first two Francisco novels were mysteries. Her latest is *The Secret Memoirs of Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis.* †

Did Bernard have ethical qualms about spending such ridiculous amounts on coffee and muffins? Yes. Would he be more ethically correct donating the money to the latest African famine relief? Yes. But in truth, Bernard loved the muffins and coffee at Plato's Cafe, loved the sun pouring through the golden oak leaves, making the wood furniture glow like amber. He loved the baskets and copper pans that hung on the walls, the treacly classical guitar music piped in over the sound system, the whoosh of the espresso machine. It set up his day differently than if he spent three bucks for bacon, eggs, and hash browns at Joe's Greece Pit.

Bernard was half in love with the cafe's proprietress, Ellen Plato, because of her name and her remarkable red cheeks. Today she was dressed like a gypsy in a red dirndl skirt, her gray braid wound around her head. She leaned her ponderous pouter-pigeon breasts over the bar and poured Bernard a cup of black Colombian. "Have you read the latest?" she asked, glancing at his *Ragley Sentinel.*

"What? Has something happened?"

She slid the platter displaying freshly baked raspberry rugalach to one side and leaned close. "They found a body at the old quarry. The police arrested a Ragley College student."

Bernard's eyes popped wide open and stayed that way. Before he could respond, a customer called for more coffee from across the room. Ellen winked at Bernard, swung the coffeepot off its hot plate, and waddled off.

Bernard snapped open his paper. As he scanned the front-page article, his heart began thumping loudly. Two boys playing in the woods by the quarry had discovered a female body in the water. The victim apparently had been strangled with wire, then dumped into the quarry. When police questioned the neighbors, Hugh

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Doyle, a retired plumber who lived on a twenty-acre apple orchard across the way, reported seeing a white Honda Civic leave the quarry on the previous evening. "Kids come up here to party—drinking and smoking—so I took down the license number," he was quoted as saying. The police checked it out. The car belonged to Tommy Huang, a Ragley College junior. When they brought him in for questioning, they discovered blood and a roll of wire in his trunk. Huang was in custody at the local jail, a three-cell holding tank in the courthouse basement. The victim was Dorothy Slauter, chairperson of the Humanities Department at Ragley College.

Bernard's ears sizzled; he slid his palms over the bar, arms straight, as if steadying himself in airplane turbulence. His forehead felt hot, and his breath was shallow and ragged.

Tommy Huang was one of his students.

One of his favorites.

After finishing his breakfast, Bernard hopped on his bike and rode toward the quarry. He pedaled out of town, down Church Street, turned at the old cemetery, and headed out Old Surrey Road. His tires whispered through great piles of red and brown leaves by the side of the road, giving him a thrill as they slipped on a slick mass. It was cold, but soon his thighs warmed and his breathing deepened.

As a tenured professor of philosophy at Ragley College, Bernard prided himself on maintaining a youthful profile. An avid mountain biker, he was in his early forties, tall and lean, with a long tangle of graying auburn hair. He often appeared in class wearing black jeans, a black T-shirt, and an earring. He was irreverent, witty, obnoxious, and adored by his students. His Ethics 101 was a popular elective that required him to speak in the largest lecture hall on campus. He tried to live what he taught: He biked to work, ate no animals, birds, or farm-raised fish, wore no leather, fathered no children, and tithed his salary to the children in Africa.

He tried to live an ethical life. To be an ethical man.

Apart from his academic duties, Bernard wrote a *Dear Ethicist* column for the *Ragley Sentinel,* which was syndicated in twenty papers across the country. It was a Dear Abby-type column in which he answered people's moral dilemmas with wry humor and occasional wit. It surprised him how often questions regarded a burdensome secret about someone else's wrongdoing—a coworker who smoked pot, a friend who downloaded music from the Internet, a brother who used fraudulent academic credentials. Bernard generally advised not to rush to authorities and betray the friendship unless someone might be physically harmed. He suggested that one should confront the offender personally. The ethical goal was to alter thinking and behavior, not to punish.

Bernard was not a big fan of authority. He believed peer pressure worked better and created greater harmony in the commu-

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nity. Authority was undemocratic, he felt, subject to abuse and corruption. By their nature, authorities humiliated their subjects, abusing their autonomy. He'd been a victim himself, arrested during environmental protests, tossed into jail, mocked and ridiculed.

Bernard believed that in a world where people lived ethically there would be no need for authority.

When he got to the quarry, Bernard locked his bike around a road sign across from Hugh Doyle's orchard. Hugh was in the shed that was attached to his rambling white farmhouse, mixing pesticide for an old-fashioned backsprayer. He did not notice Bernard.

Bernard crossed the road to the quarry. A well-worn trail of dead leaves pulverized into light brown confetti led to Devil's Rock, a jagged precipice of shale that loomed over the quarry. On hot summer nights, this was where the showoffs and rowdies somersaulted and dove into the black water.

As Bernard climbed the slope, his feet kept slipping. His muscles, already tired from the bike ride, burned with the effort. He grabbed at young saplings to pull himself up. All around, ferns and moss had been trampled; scraps of yellow police tape wound between some of the trees. The normal debris around the quarry—beer bottles and cigarette butts—had been bagged and carted away as evidence.

Dear Ethicist, One of my students committed murder.

As he trudged, Bernard wondered if he was morally culpable in some way. Should he go to the police and tell them of the final-exam question he had posed to his students in his Ethics in Contemporary America class: Is murder ever ethical? Most essays he received were about self-defense or war. Tommy Huang's was different.

A biology major, Tommy was bright and articulate, insightful without being cynical. His eyes sparkled when his mind grabbed on to a new idea. He liked to challenge Bernard, and the class often waited with baited breath listening to them spar, staying long after the period ended, cheering as one of them scored with a barbed quip.

In his essay, Tommy Huang proposed that if society at large was better off without an individual, then it was ethically correct to rid the community of that person. As an example, he argued that it was ethically right for Hitler's generals to plot his murder. Even after the final exam, Tommy shot e-mails off to Bernard, diving deeper and deeper into the argument.

Bernard had been delighted to have a student still fired up about a topic after the term had ended. He encouraged the boy. Apart from their e-mail exchange, they took walks through the Ragley campus, discussing, arguing, often ending up at Plato's Cafe.

Was Bernard ethically obligated to tell the police about Tommy's speculations on performing the perfect murder? Suppressing evidence would be unethical, but were Tommy's theoretical answers evidence of his intent to murder? Would it be wrong to shred

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Tommy's exam paper?

As he reached Devil's Rock, Bernard bent over to stretch his back and hamstrings. The air was still and heavy as if under a bell jar. The water below was opaque, black as obsidian. The woods beyond teemed with life—birds, chipmunks, beetles, fox, deer—yet by the quarry, only an occasional bird flitted between the branches. As if lost.

He straightened his back and looked around with an uneasy sense that someone was watching. He recognized the feeling for what it was—guilt.

Would anybody be harmed if he didn't speak to the police? he asked himself. If Tommy had committed murder but was released for lack of evidence, he might commit murder again. But didn't Bernard also have an ethical responsibility to himself and the subject he loved not to get involved in unnecessary scandal?

This was the problem—and joy—of ethics: You could argue yourself into or out of almost anything.

Bernard looked out over the still water. The murder site.

He imagined her body floating there, red cuts on her neck, her pale heavyset corpse as bloated as a sausage tortellini in broth, her gray cropped hair waving like a sea anemone.

Strangulation was a murder of hate, the squeezing out of life as the face grimaces and turns red, hands flailing, feet kicking, groin bucking, mucus seeping out of the nose and eyes, blood oozing out of garroted cuts. Who could have hated Dorothy Slauter that much?

He guessed more than a few.

Many on the faculty despised Dorothy Slauter with metastasizing hatred. She was rigid, opinionated, and often unfair—a power-hungry relic who was afraid to let go. She believed in a 1940s curriculum in the humanities and sciences. No Gay Studies, no Literature of the Insane, no Theater, no Studio Arts. She believed Ragley College was for the elite, the leaders and thinkers of the next generation. She saw no reason to reach out to the underprivileged, and vigorously opposed affirmative action. She had been blamed for driving away some of the college's best talent. Everyone on campus was eager for her retirement.

Bernard had fewer problems with her than most. He knew that if they ever talked for more than five minutes, they would be at each other's throats, so he never engaged her in conversation. Before obligatory campus functions, he always put on a conservative suit and tucked his ponytail under his shirt. He always showed up on time, flattered her wildly, then escaped across the room. It was cowardly, he admitted; it was survival.

Bernard didn't dislike Dorothy Slauter. He agreed with her that the primary purpose of a liberal arts education is to teach students to think critically, analyze data, and dissect argument. Yet he knew that she caused tremendous acrimony at the college, and

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that her ways of thinking were incompatible with reality. It was time for fresh blood.

Blood. He saw none on the ground, but the air smelled acrid and faintly pustulant like an open wound.

How had Tommy Huang lured her to the quarry? He couldn't have killed her and dragged her body there by himself. Did he have help? Would the police suspect Bernard?

Many people had seen them together around campus, but there had been nothing improper about the relationship—*was there?*—only that of professor and student. He might be questioned in any case. Perhaps it would be better to present himself.

On the other hand, he thought that he might wait a few days. Perhaps there would be more compelling evidence, or a witness who would make Bernard's contribution unnecessary, a waste of his and the police department's time. Perhaps Tommy would be cleared altogether.

There was no funeral. Dorothy Slauter's body was cremated, her ashes strewn over the water of the Ragley River by her son and daughter, who had flown in from California. There was a reception in the rose garden outside the dean's office.

Most of the faculty was there. It was all very pleasant. Almost no one spoke of Dorothy Slauter. No one spoke of the murder or the murder suspect. It was as if everyone was breathing a sigh of relief, the calm after a hurricane, before the slow process of cleaning up and rebuilding.

When Bernard returned home, he went to the kitchen and filled the kettle with water. It was afternoon, late in the day for him to make coffee, but he wanted to start the day over, needing the ritual to clear his head. As the water boiled, he went into his office and turned on the computer to check his e-mails.

First he opened his two personal e-mail addresses—the one he gave his students, and the one for friends. Then he checked dearethicist.com. Sometimes Bernard had as many as twenty e-mails from his readers; today there was one.

"Dear Ethicist," the e-mail began. "I am a student at a small liberal arts college in New England. Recently my roommate was arrested for a serious crime. Before the police searched our room, I discovered a stack of e-mails he had printed from his computer. They were between him and one of his professors. Should I give them to the police? Or should I first talk to the professor? I am a poor student. Is it ever ethical to profit from another's misfortune? Sincerely, Devil's Rock."

Bernard felt sick to his stomach; his skin chilled. It appeared Tommy's roommate was trying to blackmail him.

What had he and Tommy written? He tried to remember. Breathless, he checked his old e-mails. He'd deleted them. He

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cursed himself for his compulsive tidiness. He supposed there was a way of retrieving them, but that would require getting help, involving another person.

Bernard crossed the room and checked a manila folder on his bookshelf. Sometimes he printed out e-mails if he thought they might be used for a column or class. Yes, some of Tommy's e-mails were there. Glancing through them, he became queasy. It was worse than he thought: speculations on justifiable murder; a witty exchange about how to commit the perfect murder; and—worst of all—Tommy asking Bernard if he'd ever contemplated murder, if there was anyone he'd like murdered, and Bernard shooting back—joking, of course—that the world would be a more harmonious place without Dorothy Slauter. *Jesus!* Had he really written that? (Yes, after running into a colleague who'd ranted about Slauter turning down her proposal for a women's studies program.) He doubted that the police would see it as a joke.

He could see the headline now: *Ethicist Professor Questioned in Murder Investigation.* It would make national news. He'd lose his position, his syndicated column. The only job he'd be able to get would be teaching high-school civics in some charter school in the Midwest. If that.

Dear Ethicist, What do I do with a blackmailer? He giggled nervously to himself, temples moist with fear.

No good teacher goes unpunished. He, of all people, should've learned that from Socrates.

"May we come in, Mr. Pezzetti?" Two Ragley County detectives stood at the doorway to his cluttered office in the old sawmill.

Bernard felt his face prickle and burn. Yet he had nothing to hide. *Did he?* He invited them in.

The detectives looked around his office with surprised eyes—at the Grateful Dead and Harley Davidson posters, the blow-up doll of Homer Simpson, the stacks of comic books. Bernard was working on a paper on ethics in pop culture, his premise being that comic books and video games provided an answer to an ethical void, the pop hero always working for the greater good. It seemed better not to try to explain.

The older detective looked at a poster from the 'sixties that read *Question Authority,* where Bernard had crossed out "Authority" and had written "Morality."

The other cop caught his colleague's glance. "Question Morality?" he asked. "Aren't you an ethics professor?"

Bernard sensed the same suspicion and defensiveness that he felt with certain townsfolk of Ragley, as if they viewed the college community as subversive. He pegged both detectives as Republicans. He sighed with futility, knowing anything he said would probably seem suspicious. "If a student doesn't work out moral precepts for

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himself, morality feels imposed, dictatorial, incomprehensible. Students must question, analyze, and come to their own conclusions."

The older cop made a baleful, superior smile as if to say, *To think people waste time on such notions.*

Bernard offered the detectives a seat and bottled water, which they accepted. He felt exposed, uncomfortable in his tight T-shirt with *Animal Liberation* printed across the front. He got up from his chair and slipped on a sport coat that he hung behind the door, not caring that the detectives exchanged glances, probably interpreting his body language as an attempt to cover up.

Tight lips pressed together, the older cop began. "We understand Tommy Huang was a student of yours."

"Yes. A very bright, very gifted student."

"We understand that as your final-exam question, you asked your students—what was the course called?"

So they knew already. "Ethics in Contemporary America."

"Yes . . . you asked—" The detective paused to read from his notepad—"Is murder ever ethical?"

"Yes."

"Is it?"

Bernard expelled a nervous laugh. The cops didn't smile. They were serious. "Well, it depends on how you define murder."

"Killing someone," the younger cop said flatly.

"Well, in my course we discussed the many inconsistencies in American culture in regard to killing: We accept aborting a malformed fetus at eight or nine months, but if the baby is born, it is murder to kill it. We allow people who are brain dead to be killed to harvest their organs, yet we don't allow a terminally ill person to commit suicide. We question stem-cell research as the murder of a potential life despite the fact that the embryos will be destroyed in any case. The taking of any life is murder. But some murders are sanctioned. In self-defense, war, abortion, brain death, capital punishment. But because it is sanctioned by law, does that make it ethical?"

The detectives looked at him blankly. Then the older one said, "Weren't you worried about giving the kids ideas?"

"That's my job—to give kids ideas, to get them to think."

The younger cop nodded politely. They were both respectful and attentive. But Bernard sensed that could change in a nanosecond, the coiled tension in their bodies, ready to jump up and slam him against the wall, cuffing his hands behind his back.

"We understand that you recently gave Tommy Huang a sizeable amount of money. Ten thousand dollars."

Bernard was taken aback. How did they know about that? "Yes, I did."

"Do you often lend your students money?"

"No."

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"Was it payment, perhaps?"

"Payment? For what?"

The detective didn't answer. The word hung in the air unspoken. Murder.

"Why did you lend him the money?" the older cop asked.

It had seemed like a lot at the time, but Bernard didn't think twice about it. On principal, he was generous if someone asked him for money. Always. It wasn't an ethical conviction so much as an aversion to his father's stinginess. He didn't think the policemen would understand. "Tommy Huang is an exchange student. He has no family here in the United States. He needed cash quickly."

"Did he tell you why?"

"No. I didn't think it was my business. And if he had told me, it wouldn't be ethical for me to break his confidence."

"Tommy Huang is a murder suspect, Mr. Pezzetti. Any information you can tell us that might reveal his motivation would be appreciated."

"A motive for killing Dorothy Slauter? I can't imagine."

"Try."

"Nothing comes to mind."

"Could he have murdered her as a favor to someone?"

They mean me, he thought. "Tommy Huang is a sensitive, intelligent young man. I don't see him committing murder for any reason."

"Are you married, Mr. Pezzetti?" The younger cop—who'd been playing with a zit on his neck—took over.

"No."

"Have you ever been married?"

"No, but I date women." He tried to keep the resentment out of his voice. They suspected that he was gay, he assumed, suspected that he might be "involved" with Tommy. There had been nothing improper about the relationship—he was sure—only that of professor and student. Had Bernard been attracted to him? Only the inevitable erotic pulse of academic excitement. Had he overstepped the line between professor and student? Had he encouraged dangerous speculative thought? Had he entertained the dialogue not to mentor, but because he was flattered by the young man's attention?

"What was your relationship with Dorothy Slauter?" the older cop asked.

"Relationship? Dorothy Slauter was my boss, a capable administrator. I never had any problems with her. I kept out of her way."

"Kept out of her way? Why was that?"

"I'm known for a certain confrontational style. I didn't think it wise to antagonize someone accustomed to having her way."

"You have been selected to take her place—" he glanced at his notepad—"the Dale Parson's Chair for the Humanities?"

Bernard felt his face flush, his throat tighten. "Yes."

"That comes with a rather large stipend—is that what they call

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it? A stipend?"

How clearly they resented the college. "It's called a grant. Fifty thousand dollars a year."

"That's quite a bit of money."

"Yes."

"So . . . you benefited directly from Dorothy Slauter's death to the tune of fifty thousand dollars a year."

"The chair could've gone to any number of other people. There was no preordained succession."

"But it went to you." The detective flared his nose with sullying repugnance, implying any number of things—acting as if he knew things about him that Bernard didn't know himself.

"My books and my column lend me a certain notoriety. That may have had some bearing on my selection."

"You are being modest, I'm sure."

"No. Many collegiate decisions are made on the basis of fundraising, not merit. I don't doubt my modest celebrity will be used that way."

"Where were you on the night of June seventeenth?"

"I was at home reading."

"Do you have anyone who can vouch for you?"

"I was on the Internet. You can check that. I think there were some phone calls. No one saw me at home in person."

"You don't have any idea why your student, Tommy Huang, might want to murder Dorothy Slauter?"

"He wasn't *my student.* He was the student of a number of teachers."

"Please answer the question."

"No. I have no idea."

"We had reason to think you might."

"Me? Why?"

"We understand you were friends."

"I make myself available to all my students. But I would not say I am friends with them."

"But you spent a lot of time with Tommy Huang?"

"Not more than I spent with a dozen or so other students."

"When was the last time you saw him?"

"I don't know. A week or so ago."

"You were seen with him on the day of the murder."

"Really?" He honestly didn't remember. Who had seen them? Who was talking behind his back? "It's possible. He works part-time at the library. It's possible we ran into each other."

"Do you run into him a lot at the library?"

"No. Not at all. In fact, I usually visit the library in the evenings when he doesn't work." Bernard immediately sensed that he'd revealed too much. Was it suspicious that he would know Tommy's work hours?

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"I see," said the detective flatly. "That's all for now. If you think of anything, give us a call."

He had two more e-mails from "Devil's Rock" when he got home and another the next morning, each one more threatening than the one before. Each implying nefarious things. Each revealing something personal from Bernard's past—his messy breakup with a former girlfriend; past rejections for grants and other teaching positions; his father's drunken, abusive past, and eventual suicide. How did the kid find out about such things? The Internet, he supposed. He figured he'd been talking to the detectives. He seemed to want to humiliate Bernard. It shocked him that someone so young would be so cynical, so twisted as to insinuate himself in someone else's crisis and try to capitalize on it.

Bernard visited the registrar that afternoon and got the name of Tommy Huang's roommate. A political-science major. Later he paged through the archives of the *Phoenix,* the student newspaper, and discovered that Jeffery Messinger was a scholarship student who vociferously contested Dorothy Slauter's stance against affirmative action. He was a middling student who spent a lot of time in the student union playing pool. He appeared to be someone who hadn't made his mark in any way, who was killing time until he graduated. Not a member of any clique or club, not a partier. An outsider.

He began calling Bernard late at night at home.

"So, Bernie boy, are you really going to let ol' Tommy take the rap for this—it being your idea and all?"

"Who is this?"

"It's your conscience speaking, Bernie."

"What do you want?"

"I'm surprised at you, you being so ethical and all." The voice giggled, then hung up.

The next evening, Bernard returned home around eleven. He flipped on the hall light as he entered. He knew without asking that the young man who sat on his living room couch was Jeffery Messinger.

He was a beefy young man with short carrot-red hair that stood on end and a wide band of freckles across his nose and cheeks. He looked at Bernard with a sneering coolness.

"Professor Pezzetti. How nice to meet you." His voice was unctuous, tripping up and down the scale with ringing clarity. "You shouldn't leave your key under the doormat. How careless of you."

"What are you doing here?" Bernard demanded. He placed his hand on the phone as if to call the police. Jeffery merely lifted his chin and smirked.

"So, Bernie, this is where you hold your honors seminar." He

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stretched his arms along the top of the couch, thrusting his pelvis forward as he relaxed into the cushions. "For your favorites." He wore an ugly pinched expression as if he had always suspected everyone of trying to cheat him out of his share, and now had a chance to get it back.

Bernard didn't know how to respond. Most professors who lived close to campus held seminars in their homes. "What do you want?"

Jeffery sprang to his feet. He walked the perimeter of the room, gawking in every direction, his neck arched, chin jutted, his tongue licking his lower lip, as if mulling over flavors at an ice-cream parlor. He looked at the titles of books, ran his fingertips over the furniture, handling the baubles that Bernard had collected on trips to Greece and Thailand. "The coroner said that Dorothy Slauter didn't die from drowning."

Bernard cringed at the way he touched his things—like a slug leaving a trail. "That's what the paper reported."

"The coroner said that postmortem lividity indicated that she was killed someplace else, then transported to the quarry. So I figure Tommy had some help."

"You've been talking to the coroner?"

"Sure. I told him I was a reporter. He gave me a complete breakdown."

Jeffery had been sneaking around impersonating a reporter? Bernard was appalled. "Why are you putting so much effort into harassing me?"

"Why not? It's fun," he said, grinning. He took out a cigarette and lit it. "So, did you help him move the body?"

"Please don't smoke in here."

"What? You gonna stop me?" Jeffery paused in front of a sketch, matted and framed on the wall. "Tommy drew that, didn't he, Bernie? I recognize the spot. The creek that runs through Bramblewild Park." He turned and sneered at Bernard. "Does the spot have some special significance for you two?"

Bernard bristled at the sordid implication. Never had he found anyone quite so revolting, or a face he'd so disliked. He gave the sense of deformity, although nothing was irregular about his features. "Tommy is a talented young man."

"He'll have lots of time to draw pretty pictures in jail."

"What do you want, Mr. Messinger?" Bernard aimed for a light, mocking tone, as if he didn't take Jeffery or his threats seriously.

"*Mr.* Messinger wants money," he said. "Or maybe not. Maybe Mr. Messinger wants to watch the professor emeritus of the Dale Parsons Chair in Humanities squirm."

Bernard attempted to appear indifferent, yet waves of dread washed over him, like the rancid subterranean air from a subway grate. A sharp pain jolted his lower spine and shot down his leg. He reached for the back of a chair to steady himself.

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Jeffery laughed. He used a pencil to pick up a sweater that was folded on the back of a leather wing chair. "Tommy left his sweater? He must've spent a lot of time here."

"It's not Tommy's. One of the other students left it. I haven't had a chance to return it."

"I bet the police would find Tommy's hair on it." Jeffery sniffed it. "It even smells like Tommy."

Bernard clamped his jaws. Tommy had style beyond his years, wearing Italian slacks and silk sweaters when other students wore filthy jeans and T-shirts. Tommy wore Giò. Few other students bothered with cologne.

"You keep it around to sniff?" Jeffery leered.

Bernard blushed. He had smelled it—several times—liking the clean, slightly citrus odor, wondering if he might want to start wearing cologne. "Why don't you state what you want and leave?"

"Oh, this is rich. You were lovers."

"We were not lovers."

"Let's see—you exchanged e-mails almost every night. You took walks together through Bramblewild Park. You exchanged clothes. You framed one of his sketches. I bet there's a little love note on the back—something about it being a small token of his great esteem."

Before Bernard could stop him, he took Tommy's picture from the wall, grinning as he read what Tommy had written: *Ars longa, vita brevis. Dum spiro, spero.* Art is long, life short. While I breathe, I hope. "Sounds like a love note to me, Bernie."

Jeffery's insinuations were vulgar and annoying. Bernard imagined the police puzzling over the note, sending it out to experts—Latin scholars at Princeton. He laughed out loud.

Jeffery looked at him, puzzled.

Would the world be a better place without Jeffery Messinger? Bernard asked himself, chuckling again.

Alarm flashed over Jeffery's eyes; Bernard caught it and laughed louder. The kid must think he was crazy. Maybe he was wondering if Bernard really did hire Tommy to kill Dorothy Slauter. Bernard couldn't contain himself—a maniacal hooting tore up his throat and exploded out of his mouth.

Jeffery got to his feet nervously. "Give me ten thousand dollars and I'll keep my mouth shut."

Asking for ten thousand—he must know about the loan, too. Probably he was the one who told the police. "Tommy's computer has already been confiscated," said Bernard. "Whatever you're threatening to reveal, the police already know."

"I stripped off his e-mails before they got there. I have them on disk. Here, I'll give it to you."

"You made a duplicate, I'm sure."

"No. This is the only copy. Yours for ten thousand dollars."

Bernard picked up a white marble bust of Socrates, which had

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guarded his books since graduate school. It probably weighed twenty pounds. He rubbed his thumb fondly over its eyes and nose. What kind of adult would Messinger turn into? he wondered. If he played at blackmail at twenty, what would come next? He obviously found pleasure in tormenting others, a sexual gratification that would demand bigger and bigger payoffs. Would the world be better without Jeffery Messinger? How many others would become his victims?

"After I give you ten thousand, you'll ask for more," said Bernard.

Jeffery tried to dart around him. "No, I won't. You'll never hear from me again."

Bernard turned swiftly and brought Socrates down on Jeffery's head. He crumpled to the floor.

Bernard sank into the couch, his fury expelled. He stared at the body for several minutes, making sure it was dead.

Dear Ethicist, I committed murder. What is the ethical thing to do?

Bernard smiled sadly, dialed the police, and waited for them to arrive.

His first night in jail wasn't so bad. He slept well. In the morning, Ellen Plato dropped off coffee, two muffins, and a paper. It almost felt routine.

He turned to the front page: *Lover of Murdered Professor Confesses to Killing. Tommy Huang Released.*

Many on campus had suspected that Dorothy Slauter was a lesbian, but she had been very much in the closet; she even wore the wedding band of her deceased husband. A lover's spat. Of course. Bernard never could figure how Tommy lured Slauter out to the quarry. For her lover, it would've been simple. She confessed to having slept beside Slauter's dead body for several hours before rolling it into the quarry, which explained the postmortem lividity.

According to the article, the blood in Tommy's car turned out to be that of roadkill—a raccoon Tommy had picked up to dissect for biology class. The wire was common picture-framing wire, not the copper wire found around Dorothy Slauter's hands. His reason for parking near the quarry—gathering ferns for his drawing class—now seemed plausible.

What a waste, thought Bernard. His blackmailer would've gone away, but now . . .

He heard voices—the jailer and a familiar baritone. The door rattled open.

"You'd think leading an ethical life would at least keep you out of jail," said his lawyer as he sauntered in.

"You'd think," answered Bernard lugubriously.

He then did the polite—if not ethical—thing to do. He offered his lawyer a bran muffin.

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Art by Allen Davis

ROMEO AND JOLIET

by Edward D. Hoch

The man who came through the door of our little office at Broadway and 12th Street on that sunny September afternoon was carrying a briefcase, but he had the pale complexion, shaved head, tattoo on one wrist, and two-day growth of beard that marked him for me as an ex-convict. To Juliet Ives, my partner in both business and pleasure, he looked more like the latest Hollywood heartthrob for teenage girls.

She was on the phone when I ushered him into my office, but within minutes she rang me. "Stanton, who *is* that hunk?"

"Our new client," I told her. "Come in and I'll introduce you."

She was through the door seconds later, all smiles, with her hand extended. "I'm Juliet Ives. We're partners in this courier business. Do you need something transported?"

"Raul Faccet. Pleased to meet you. Yes, I do need something transported, by courier to Australia. Is this the sort of job you can undertake?"

"Certainly," I told him. "What sort of cargo is it?"

"Fifty old glass-plate negatives from the early twentieth century. They're very delicate and must be handled with care. I wouldn't

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trust them to any of the regular shipping services."

"What sort of pictures are they?" Ives wondered. "Pornography?"

"Hardly! I brought one along to show you." He reached into his briefcase and carefully removed a bubble-wrapped glass negative about four by five inches in size.

I held the glass up to the light and saw what appeared to be a stone building with battlements along the sides and turrets at each corner. An American flag flew overhead. "What is it? A fort?"

"The former women's prison at Joliet, Illinois. It closed in nineteen thirty-two."

"Are the other negatives like this?"

"More or less," Faccet hedged. "One is of the Joliet Prison Honor Band with their instruments, back in nineteen fifteen."

"How did they come into your possession?" Ives wanted to know, crossing her long legs to give him a view. "Are you asking us to transport anything illegal?"

"No, no. Nothing like that."

"You say Australia." I was making notes as we talked.

"Sydney, to be exact."

"Who would we deliver them to?"

"Well . . . me, I suppose. I'd be taking a later flight."

"Wait a minute!" The alarms were going off in Ives's brain. "If we're delivering them to you in Sydney, why don't you simply carry them on the plane yourself? Is there something you're not telling us?"

He sighed, shifting uneasily in his chair. "It's a long story."

"We've got time." We had plenty of time. He was our first client in over a week.

"All right. Early in nineteen ninety-nine I was sentenced to two to six years at Joliet for possession of marijuana." I shot Ives a glance, as if to say I told you so, though I hadn't had a chance to tell her anything.

"Go on."

"Joliet is an old prison, built in eighteen fifty-eight when it was the largest in the country. By the time of my sentencing it was showing its age and in the process of being shut down. There were

Edward D. Hoch's Stanton and Ives series, to which this story belongs, has evoked strong reactions from many of his fans. Some hail the series as something fresh—a new direction for the author of more than 900 published short stories. Others find it too brash to suit the creator of the most accomplished traditional mysteries currently being written at short-story length. One thing is certain: Mr. Hoch is enjoying writing the series. †

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still more than a thousand inmates, but it worked more as a reception and classification center. Most inmates stayed for a month or less before being shipped off to Statesville or one of the other prisons in northern Illinois. I was lucky, maybe because my crime didn't involve violence. I was assigned to assist a photographer in the Bureau of Identification, taking mug shots and such. In one corner of the darkroom was an old wooden filing cabinet containing hundreds of glass negatives dating from the early nineteen hundreds. Apparently they were kept for occasional use in penal publications that requested them. Everything was in the process of being moved to Joliet's sister prison at Statesville, and as it turned out, Joliet was closed for good in two thousand two."

I stared down at the glass negative on my desk. "Are you telling me you stole these plates from Joliet?"

"Not really. When the cabinets were being moved to Statesville I asked the prison photographer if I could take a few of those old negatives as souvenirs. He said sure, go ahead. There was no inventory. No one knew how many there were."

Ives gave one of her familiar snorts. "So you took fifty of them. How did you get them out of the prison?"

"I was in charge of packaging things for shipment during the move. I simply packaged some of the glass negatives separately and addressed them to my sister in Chicago."

"When were you released from prison?" I asked.

"Just last year. I got into some trouble when they moved me to Stateville and ended up serving five of my six years. Then I was on parole for another year and couldn't leave the country without permission. I'm free of all that crap now."

"So you're going to Australia." I repeated Ives's question. "Why don't you take the negatives with you?"

That sigh again. "Because I'm an ex-con. I'm free to leave the country but how do I know what'll come up when my name goes into the computer? I'd want those negatives in my carry-on bag so they don't get tossed around and broken. Suppose they do a special search on me and start asking questions? You're an approved courier service. If the package is sealed they'll just X-ray it and let it through. With me they might open it and ask questions."

"Will the X-ray damage the negatives?"

Raul Faccet shook his head. "It shouldn't, but just to make sure I'll have them in a lead-lined box, along with a customs declaration as to the contents."

"All right," I agreed. "If it's worth our fee and round-trip tickets we'll fly it over for you."

He frowned at that. "Do both of you go?"

"When we're transporting valuables in a carry-on, one of us needs to be awake at all times. It's about a fourteen-hour flight to Sydney, isn't it?"

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"Twenty hours from JFK," Faccet corrected me. "It's almost ten thousand miles. I guess you will need two couriers."

Arrangements were made that Ives would pick up the package and our plane tickets the following day, along with half our fee. We would depart the day after that, on Thursday. Since we'd skip a day flying west, it would be Saturday when we arrived in Sydney. "These long plane trips are getting me down," Ives grumbled the next morning, doing her daily high-kicking exercises as if she were punting a football. "Why can't we get an assignment delivering a pizza to Jersey City?"

"I'm sure they have more than enough of their own," I told her. "And stop distracting me with your legs."

She met our client on Wednesday afternoon and came back to the apartment with a well-wrapped package about the size of a shoebox. "Here it is," she announced, placing it on the table with a certain smugness. A label on the top read: *Sirius Project, Sydney, Australia.*

"That took you long enough."

"He suggested we stop for a cocktail so I agreed. Then he tried to hit on me."

"What?"

"I told you he was a real hunk."

"He's an ex-convict!"

"But still a hunk. He asked if we were married and when I told him no he took that as permission to come on strong."

"Ives, I don't believe what you're telling me."

"Don't worry, nothing happened. Not yet, anyway. When I told him I couldn't go back to his apartment he suggested we might get together in Sydney."

"Is that what you have in mind?"

"If it was, would I be telling you?"

The big Qantas Airways jet landed at Kingsford Smith Airport south of Sydney, on industrialized Botany Bay. As we descended through the clouds I could see tongues of flame from a petroleum refinery burning off excess gases. "Twenty hours," Ives said with a groan.

"Cheer up. The stewardess told me the flight from London is twenty-four hours."

We showed our passports and customs papers for the package, then passed quickly through to the baggage-claim area. We'd booked a room at the newly remodeled Hilton Sydney and the first thing I did was phone the New York office. Our part-time secretary was on the job, assuring me there'd been no new business in our absence. "I don't know if that's good or bad," Ives grumbled. "We're not exactly getting rich at this."

"But we're seeing lots of the world."

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After a bite to eat and a good night's sleep we were feeling more human. I woke up aware that Ives had rolled on top of me and was starting to tickle me with her nimble fingers. "Are you awake?"

"I am now. What time is it?"

"Almost nine."

"Stop that!" I said, pushing her hand away. "We've got to deliver this box to Faccet when his plane gets in."

"That's not for three hours yet."

We finally showered, dressed, and had breakfast at the hotel, then walked several blocks along Circular Quay to the spectacular Opera House that dominated the waterfront. We were back at the hotel by noon and found a telephone message awaiting us: *Please call Astrid at the Conservatorium of Music for important information re: Raul Faccet.*

"What should we do?" Ives wondered.

"Call her, of course. Maybe his plane has been delayed."

Astrid's voice had a youthful tone to it, with the trace of an accent I couldn't identify. "Thank you for calling, Mr. Stanton. There has been a change of plans. Raul Faccet is unable to meet you and he asks that you make delivery directly to me."

"I don't think I could do that without direct authorization from him," I told her. "For one thing, he still owes half of our fee."

"That's no bother. As a representative of the Sirius Project I am prepared to settle his account in return for the parcel."

"Exactly what is this Sirius Project?"

"A business venture. It needn't concern you."

"Look, I still need authorization from Mr. Faccet. Could you instruct him to phone me?"

"Are you in your hotel room now?"

"That's correct."

"Very well. He will contact you shortly."

She hung up and I did likewise. "That's very odd," I told Ives.

We sat there awaiting the call from Faccet. After about twenty minutes there was a knock at the door and I foolishly opened it a crack. Two men hit it at once, knocking me aside. One was a lumbering, muscular sort while the other was slender and almost boyish. "We've come for the parcel," he said, getting directly to the point.

"What parcel is that?" Ives asked. "Who are you?"

The slender one reached her in two quick steps and slapped her across the face. "We're your worst nightmare," he said. "We want the parcel."

I made a move toward him and the big one grabbed me by the collar. Ives lunged for the man who'd slapped her but he merely grinned as he caught her in a bear hug. "Keep it up! I like my sheilas feisty. It makes for more fun later."

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"Let her go!" I yelled. "There's no parcel here. Search the room if you don't believe me."

He shoved Ives onto the bed and spent all of two minutes doing just that. There was nowhere that a parcel the size of a shoebox could be hidden in the room, but he even looked inside the small safe provided for guests. He came up to me as I struggled to breathe in the big one's grasp. "Where is it? Tell me or I start on the girl."

"It's downstairs in the lobby safe," I told him. There was no way I was going to put Ives at risk.

"All right. Sandy here is going to take you down. If you try anything, or you aren't back in ten minutes, I'll start on the girl." Ives looked at me and curled into a protective ball on the bed.

"No," I said. "I'm not leaving her here. Besides, they'll need her signature to hand over the parcel. Take her downstairs and I'll stay."

He thought about that and finally took a spring knife with a six-inch blade from his pocket. "Take her down, Sandy. I'll keep Mr. Stanton company."

I replaced Ives on the bed and wondered if I'd ever see her again. The slender man was standing about ten feet away with the knife pointed at me. "No tricks or you're a dead man," he said. I tried to think of a trick but my mind was blank with fear, mostly for Ives.

"What are you after?" I asked. "We're just doing our job."

"So am I."

After a long five minutes that seemed more like twenty, there was a knock on the door and I heard Ives's voice. "We're back. Let us in."

The slender man edged over to the door, keeping his eyes on me. "Did you get it, Sand—?" he started to ask as he opened it.

Then he gasped and fell back into the room, the knife clattering to the floor. Raul Faccet entered the room ahead of Ives, something glittering on his fist. It took me an instant to realize he was wearing a pair of brass knuckles.

"He saved me, Stanton," Ives told me, the words tumbling out of her. "He followed them up here and rescued me!"

"Where's Sandy, the big guy?"

"Out in the stairwell," she told me, lowering her voice a bit. "I think our client might have killed him."

The guy with the knife was still alive, at least, and when he sat up holding his swollen jaw Faccet asked, "Who sent you?"

He could barely speak. "You . . . broke it."

"Maybe. Answer a few questions and we'll get you to a hospital."

"Where . . . is Sandy?"

"He fell down the stairwell. What's your name?"

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"Roo," it sounded like.

"We'd better call hotel security," I suggested. "They can handle it from here." When Faccet didn't answer, I added, "Right now, if we call them, it's self-defense. If we wait, or try to cover it up, it becomes something else."

"I suppose you're right," he agreed. "This was just an attempted robbery. We don't have to mention the parcel."

"I'll call them. Get rid of those brass knuckles."

The hotel's security people were quick and efficient. They found Sandy battered but alive in the stairwell and called for an ambulance and police. Faccet, Ives, and I were questioned for over an hour, but in the end the police bought our story that our friend Faccet had arrived just in time to thwart a hotel robbery. It helped that the two injured men were both well known to the authorities. The first officers on the scene were followed by Inspector Kevin Blake, a lanky middle-aged man with a rough, reddish complexion.

"Those two are known as Roo and Sandy," he told us. "A couple of strongarm men who have quite a record."

"His name is Roo?" Ives asked.

"Short for Kangaroo, a nickname he earned from all his hopping around in younger days."

I nodded in agreement. "I figured he was a local when he called Ives a 'sheila.' That's Australian slang, isn't it?"

The inspector nodded. "A girl or young woman. Nothing derogatory. You've got quite a fist there, Mr. Faccet. I'm surprised you didn't bruise your knuckles."

"I'm in good shape," Faccet told him. "I work out every day."

"You should be a prizefighter."

"I've been told that before."

He frowned down at our passports. "You're on a courier mission, Mr. Stanton?"

"That's correct. Ms. Ives and I transported a parcel for Mr. Faccet. Apparently they were trying to steal it."

He turned to our client. "What was the nature of the parcel?"

"Research material."

"Drugs?"

"Hardly," I said. "It was checked by customs and even sniffed by a dog."

"Historical photo negatives from a hundred years ago," Faccet explained. "Of value only to museums."

"Those two don't usually deal in museum thefts. Someone hired them for this job. If I may, I'd like to see this parcel."

One of the officers accompanied Ives while she retrieved it from the hotel's vault. Seated on the bed, Faccet carefully cut through the packing material and unwrapped it. The box was opened to reveal a row of carefully wrapped glass photo negatives. He

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removed a few to show Inspector Blake. Faccet explained each picture as he held up the negative. "This one shows prisoners at Joliet playing baseball in the early nineteen hundreds. The prison had a large baseball field. . . . This negative shows the prison mess hall. Some of these film negatives are mug shots of the prisoners themselves." Many of the mug shots had been taken with the prisoner standing by a slanted mirror that captured both profile and full face in a single image.

Blake glanced at a few of them and seemed satisfied. "Very well. If this goes to trial we'll be in touch with you about testifying."

I spoke up then. "Ives and I will be returning to America on Monday."

"You'll be staying?" he asked our client.

"For the time being."

"That should suffice, along with sworn statements from the two of you."

Later, after the police had left the room, Ives told me, "Raul saved my life out there. We've got to help him any way we can."

I glanced over at our client, who still looked merely like an ex-con to me. "What's your situation now?"

"I'm afraid they're trying to kill me."

"Who is?" Ives asked him. I was beginning to think she'd really fallen for this guy. She was Juliet and he was her Romeo.

"It's a long story that needn't concern you."

"What about a woman named Astrid?" I asked. "She phoned here and I called her back at the Conservatorium of Music. She said your flight had been delayed and we should deliver the parcel to her. She mentioned the Sirius Project. When I refused to do anything until I heard directly from you, I think she sent those goons here. I didn't mention that part to the police."

"Astrid Graff. I know her."

"Why would she want these photo negatives?"

"I have no idea," he murmured, but I could see he wasn't being completely open with us. "Look, can we put my parcel back in your hotel safe until tomorrow? I think it would be safer there."

We agreed to that. "Do you have the rest of our money?" I asked as he was leaving.

"I'll have it tomorrow when I pick up my parcel," he promised.

"Can we believe him?" I asked Ives when we were alone.

She shrugged. "He seems like a nice guy."

"Did he ask you out for a drink again?"

"No!" Her eyes flashed at me. "Getting a little jealous, are we?"

"Not really. Look, we've still got some time this afternoon. I'm going over to the Conservatorium of Music and talk to Astrid Graff. I want you to find out anything you can about this Sirius Project. I know Sirius is the Dog Star, but is it something else, too?

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If the library doesn't have anything, use one of their computer search engines."

"You're into your detective mode again, Stanton. But if you suspect Raul of a crime, what is it? Stealing some old glass negatives that nobody wanted?"

"Let's get going. We'll take the package back to the hotel vault and be on our way. I'll meet you here for dinner."

The Conservatorium of Music was located in the park on Bennelong Point, not far from the Sydney Opera House. A circular portrait of a dark-skinned Aborigine with ceremonial paint on his face and shoulders greeted me as I entered. The receptionist informed me that this was Bennelong, an Aborigine who'd traveled to England and met with George III in 1792. "The point is named after him," she informed me. "How can I help you?"

"I'd like to see Astrid Graff."

"I'll see if she's available. Your name?"

"Walt Stanton. I spoke with her on the phone earlier today."

Five minutes later a door opened and she appeared. I guessed her to be around thirty, with a strong jaw line that was unusual but not unattractive. Her long brown hair was gathered behind her head and she wore fashionable oval eyeglasses. "I'm Astrid Graff. Can I help you?"

"I spoke with you on the phone earlier today regarding Raul Faccet's package."

"You must have me confused with someone else. I didn't speak with you."

"You called our hotel and left a message. I called you back at your office here just a few hours ago."

She glanced toward the receptionist and said, "Come back to my office for a moment, Mr. Stanton. Perhaps we can straighten this matter out."

Her office was small, but its single window afforded a spectacular view of the Opera House in all its splendor. When I was seated opposite her desk, I opened the conversation. "Faccet told me he knew you."

"Who are you? A detective?"

"No, my partner and I operate a courier service. I'm just trying to figure out what we've gotten ourselves into. After I spoke with you a couple of thugs came by our room to steal Faccet's package. Do you know him or not?"

She thought about her reply for a moment and then shrugged. "He thinks he's God's gift to women. I don't want anything more to do with him."

"When was he over here?"

"He wasn't, till now. I was in the States a few months ago and

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met with him. He showed me lots of old photographs he'd gotten from somewhere."

"How did he contact you in the first place?"

"Through a local solicitor named Ralph McNaughton. He's on the Conservatorium's board of trustees and when he heard I'd be visiting New York he asked me to meet with Mr. Faccet and look through these pictures he had. I went to Mr. Faccet's apartment and he showed me some prints he'd made from old photo negatives. They seemed to be of a prison, with several mug shots of inmates. He asked if any of them looked familiar."

"Did they?"

"Well, not really. I thought one of them looked like a younger version of Mr. McNaughton, but that was hardly possible when the pictures were nearly a hundred years old."

"Who told you to call us at the hotel?"

"McNaughton. He asked me to negotiate for that package, but I called him back and said you needed Mr. Faccet's approval. I had the impression he'd call you."

"You told me on the phone you represented the Sirius Project. Exactly what is it?"

"I have no idea. Mr. McNaughton told me to say that."

"The name means nothing to you?"

"Not a thing."

I thanked her for her help and left the office, wondering if she'd be reporting my visit to Ralph McNaughton.

Ives was waiting for me back at the hotel. After I told her of my conversation with Astrid Graff, she said, "You still found out more than I did. The only reference to Sirius I could find at the library was a British warship of that name more than two hundred years ago, the flagship of a fleet of eleven vessels from England."

"We can ask Faccet about it tomorrow when he picks up the package and pays us the rest of our fee."

But as it turned out, we never saw our client again. Inspector Blake woke us before eight to tell us our client had been shot to death during the night near Sydney Harbour Bridge. "So much for your Romeo," I told Ives.

Blake and his assistant arrived while we were still having breakfast in our room. He pulled up a chair and joined us. "It's a murder investigation now. To start with, I need to know where you both were between one and three this morning."

"We were in bed together, as you must have guessed," Ives told him. "Is that a good enough alibi?"

"No, but it will have to do for the moment." He flipped open his notebook. "With Mr. Faccet dead, we'll have to take those photo negatives as evidence. You'd better get them out of the hotel safe. They may supply a motive for the crime."

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"We're still owed half our fee," I protested.

The inspector grunted. "You can argue that out with his estate. I suppose they might claim it wasn't owed to you because you never completed delivery."

"He told us to keep them overnight," Ives said, joining in the argument. "And what about those two hoods you arrested?"

"They're still under guard at the hospital."

"Find out who they worked for and you'll probably have your killer."

"They're security guards for a so-called hotel over on Anzac Parade, owned by an American named Gary Cobley. You understand that in our country an old law forbids the consumption of liquor except in residential premises, so the pubs fashion themselves as hotels."

"What's his place called?" I asked.

"The Anzac. Cobley is usually at one of his pokies, though. They're private membership clubs with poker machines, like your American slot machines. Very popular here. Now suppose you turn over that package."

We had little choice if we didn't want to be locked up ourselves, so Ives went off to retrieve the parcel from the hotel vault and we handed it over to Blake and his man. "You're free to leave the country now," he informed us. "With Faccet dead we won't be pursuing that altercation in your room."

"Thank you, Inspector," I said.

That was when we should have checked out and headed back to the airport, but Ives was in one of her conscientious phases. "Stanton, we took half the man's money and got a free trip to Australia. We owe him something."

"Like what?"

"Like finding out if this man Cobley killed him."

Our return tickets were for Monday anyway, so I figured we might as well give it a shot. If Cobley's henchmen were still in the hospital, maybe it was safe to seek him out. "There's someone else, too," Ives reminded me. "This Ralph McNaughton that Astrid told you about."

I agreed. "He's a local solicitor. Should be easy to track down."

He was. The phone book gave an office address on Elizabeth Street and we found it without difficulty, only a few blocks from the hotel. McNaughton allowed us only a few minutes, saying he had a noon luncheon date. He was a handsome man around fifty, with thinning hair, a pleasant smile, and frown lines that hinted at a need for glasses. "Do you have a legal problem?" he asked after we were seated.

"We're a courier service," I told him. "We were employed by Raul Faccet."

"Ah!" He shuffled a few papers nervously but his smile quickly

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returned. "I was contacted by Mr. Faccet earlier this year. I never met the man but I understand from this morning's television news that he was here in Sydney and someone shot him overnight."

"I should tell you I've already spoken with Astrid Graff. She told me you arranged for her to meet with Faccet in New York."

"Quite correct. Astrid is a fine young woman whom I know through my service as a trustee of the Conservatorium. When I heard she was traveling to New York I suggested she meet with Mr. Faccet."

"What was this all about?" I asked.

"The man had some old photo negatives from an American prison that had been closed. They were of no interest to me."

"Have you ever heard of the Sirius Project?"

"No." His hand was busy playing with a paper clip. "I'm not familiar with it."

"How about Gary Cobley?"

"I know the name. He has some clubs around town."

"Ever done any legal work for him?"

"Not personally. I can't speak for other members of my firm." He stood up, signaling an end to the meeting. "Now you'll have to excuse me. I must be off to lunch."

Back in the street, Ives asked, "What now?"

"We go in search of Gary Cobley."

Our first stop was the Anzac Hotel, but Cobley was nowhere to be found. After a couple of cans of Pilsner we learned that he was probably at one of his pokies a few blocks away. When we arrived, the security guard demanded our membership cards, but a call to Cobley finally got us an escort to his upstairs office, passing long lines of noisy slot machines that spun out new poker hands with each pull of the lever.

Gary Cobley proved to be an American of late middle age, the sort one might expect to be running a chain of gambling parlors. "I'm Cobley," he greeted us. "What's so important that you needed to see me? The little lady lose her shopping money in the pokies?" It was the first time anyone had ever referred to long-legged Ives as "the little lady."

"I think you know it's more important than that," I told him. "We operate a courier service and our client got himself killed last night. We figured you might know something about it since you sent a couple of your security guards to rough us up yesterday."

"If you mean Sandy and Roo, they were on their own. I had nothing to do with that. They certainly didn't kill your man, since they're both still in hospital."

"You employed them, didn't you?"

"They take side jobs all the time. They might have been working for anyone."

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"Perhaps they were working for the Sirius Project," Ives suggested.

He eyed her suspiciously, trying to gauge how much she knew. "What did Faccet tell you?"

"Nothing. He merely hired us as couriers because he feared his prison record might make him a target for an airport search. But we know *Sirius* was the flagship of a fleet that sailed from England in seventeen eighty-six. It was the First Fleet, wasn't it? That's what it was called, the First Fleet."

He must have pushed a buzzer beneath his desk, because the door behind us opened to admit another of his security guards, this one with a bulge under his left arm that he made no attempt to conceal. "Our little talk is ended," Cobley told us. "Felix will show you out."

I could see Ives had hit a nerve with her mention of the ship, but I couldn't figure out where she was headed. "Australia was settled by convicts, if I remember my history." She was pressing on, ignoring the arrival of Felix. "The *Sirius* was the flagship of that first shipment from British prisons."

"I'm an American, remember?" he said with a smile. "What happened here in seventeen eighty-six doesn't concern me in the least."

"Hey, I didn't study sociology at Princeton for nothing." She pressed on, in her familiar attack mode. "The United States has had a Witness Protection Program in operation since the late nineteen sixties, placing more than three hundred witnesses, usually in federal racketeering cases, in new locations, with new identities to protect them. Suppose organized crime developed a similar program, to set up ex-convicts in another country, free from parole officers and the FBI? They might have started with ex-cons from just one prison, maybe Joliet in Illinois."

But Cobley seemed unfazed by her words. "Hell, everyone knows what I do here, the same thing I did back in the States. Raul Faccet didn't come here to blackmail me."

"Then who was he blackmailing?" I asked. We had him hooked now and I wasn't letting go of the line.

"If I tell you I'll have to kill you," he said with a grin, making light of the threat.

"Try me," I challenged, aware that Felix was still behind me, possibly with a weapon.

"The little lady was pretty close in her guesswork. Just as the *Sirius* brought shiploads of convicts to settle Australia, the Sirius Project was an attempt to place ex-cons from Joliet prison in new lives here. The underworld provided money and new identities for our people. This went on for twenty years without a hitch until Faccet got sent there for possession of pot and they gave him a job clearing out the old photo lab. In addition to those old glass nega-

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tives he found more recent film negatives of mug shots, along with rap sheets for each one. He heard about the resettlement here in Sydney, probably from a fellow prisoner. But his crime wasn't serious enough to make him a candidate for mob resettlement. He was more interested in using those negatives and rap sheets to track down and blackmail some of the previous settlers."

"Who, for instance?" Ives asked.

"After twenty years, some of us have become quite successful in our new lives, running pokies and markets and banks. Some are even professional men such as physicians."

"And solicitors?"

He shrugged. "They fit in very well, passing themselves off as native Aussies. Apparently Faccet spent this past year studying Sydney newspapers and tabloids, looking for faces that might match those negatives. I was easy to find, but Raul Faccet should have realized there were men here who would kill rather than have their new lives ruined by revelations from a past half a world away. Since none of this concerns you, I'd advise you to stop asking questions and return home." He signaled the waiting guard. "Felix will show you out," he said again, and this time we didn't argue.

"We'll be out of here tomorrow," I said when we'd returned to our room. "We did what we could."

"Maybe we can do more," Ives suggested.

"How's that?"

She reached beneath her blouse and pulled out some photo negatives. "These were loose in Faccet's package, along with the glass ones. I figured they were more recent."

"Ives . . ."

"I know, we should have given the whole thing to Inspector Blake. But when I went to get it from the hotel vault, I took another quick look and decided we should keep these."

"You know these mug shots from the last twenty years are the important ones. No one cares about the prison band from the last century."

She spread them out on the coffee table. There were about two dozen in all, but it was impossible to identify anyone from them. "We need to get prints made, Stanton."

"We need to catch our flight home, that's what we need. Let the police worry about these things."

The words were barely out of my mouth when I heard the knock on our door. Careful to keep the chain on this time, I opened it a crack to see Inspector Blake standing there alone. "Let me in, Mr. Stanton. I have an important matter of missing evidence to discuss."

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I groaned inwardly, picturing us hauled off to a Sydney jail. "Ives," I said over my shoulder, "Inspector Blake is here."

She cursed softly and scooped up the negatives.

I unchained the door and let him in. As soon as he was inside he came right to the point. "When Faccet showed me those glass negatives yesterday there were some loose negatives in the package with them. Those were missing when you turned them over to me this morning."

"I know," Ives admitted, standing up to face him. "I removed them before I gave it to you. They were people Faccet was planning to blackmail, former convicts who'd built new lives here in Sydney. One of them killed him."

"You're correct about that," Inspector Blake said as he drew the pistol from his belt holster.

The gun and its meaning had barely registered on my mind when Ives high-kicked it out of his hand and toppled him to the floor, landing on top of him. "Help me, Stanton!" she yelled. "He killed Faccet!"

By the time other detectives arrived on the scene, the fight had gone out of Blake. He sat there in handcuffs, smoking a cigarette, and spoke frankly. "There's no point in lying about it," he told the men who'd worked under him. "It wasn't premeditated and I killed him with my own weapon. It's right there in your evidence bag. He arranged to meet me near the bridge after midnight. He wanted money or he'd sell my mug shot and rap sheet to a tabloid paper. He started with me simply because I was first on his list alphabetically, and he'd recognized my picture in the local paper a few months back. He needed money right away to pay you couriers. If he'd started with McNaughton or one of the others he might still be alive, but I had too much to lose. Nobody wants an ex-convict as a detective inspector."

They took him away, along with Ives's stash of negatives. "You were ready for him," I said when we were alone. "Why didn't you tell me you suspected him?"

"My evidence was awfully flimsy, but it made sense to me. After all, why would an inspector involve himself with a brawl in a hotel room? And when he came by this morning after the murder he knew Faccet had left the parcel in our hotel safe. The only one who could have told him that was Faccet himself. If he met with Faccet last night and Faccet was murdered then, it certainly made him a strong suspect."

"You were ready when he pulled that gun. You moved so fast I hardly saw it."

"I was ready, Stanton. There are times when the foot is quicker than the eye." ●

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DEADMAN'S WOOD

by Peter Turnbull

MONDAY

The body was discovered in thick undergrowth, in a copse, in the middle of a patchwork of fields to the north of the city of York. The man who found the body somehow sensed what he was going to find. Some presence drew him to the small wood. He walked towards it, steadily, purposefully, across the meadow, careful not to split the herd of cows, rather he observed the rule of walking at the edge of the herd. Cows, he knew, do not like being split, especially when there are calves in the herd. The maternal instinct of a cow with a calf is fearsome to behold: It was the one occasion that he had had to run for his life, when he inadvertently walked between cow and calf. The cow had still pursued him long after he no longer posed a threat to the calf, and he made it over the gate of the field with seconds to spare. So he walked around the edge of the Herefords, and they, recognising him, did not react to his presence. He reached the wood and stepped thankfully into its shade, for it was July and the sun was fierce. The man knew the wood well, he had climbed its trees and ridden his bike along its smooth, undulating summer-hard paths. But now, that morning, the wood was no longer a place of childhood merriment, it had a sinister feel about it. He noticed the flies, he noticed how they hovered as usual in a dancing swarm at the edge of the wood, but also, less usually, they buzzed in large, eager numbers in a specific location in the undergrowth. The man had once read that a fly can scent rotting flesh from four miles' distance in favourable weather conditions and when, on occasions, he had come across the carcass of a fallen ani-

Yorkshire author Peter Turnbull has a new novel out in Britain to rave reviews. Says *The Observer* of *Trophy Wife* (Allison & Busby/ December 2005): "Grips like the devil's forceps." "Starkly told and distinctly scary," adds the *Daily Telegraph*, while the London *Times* concludes that the book "pulses with authenticity and atmosphere." Mr. Turnbull's latest tale for us stars his York policemen Hennessey and Yellich. ✝

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mal which was covered in flies, like a black, heaving carpet, he could well believe it. He walked deeper into the wood, to where the flies had gathered, and saw his first deceased human being.

The body, that of an adult male, seemed to have bloated in the heat, with the shirt pulled taut across a bulging stomach, the face lean and whiskered, the hair matted with something black. The man wore city shoes, white trousers. Whoever the dead man was, he was no countryman.

Two men in a small wood. One was alive, the other was dead. Very dead indeed.

The living man stepped backwards, then turned and walked from the wood, across the meadow, past the herd of cows. He reached his Range Rover and opened the door and picked up his mobile, the mobile he always meant to carry with him, but never seemed to do so. He dialled 999, but failed to connect, the area being a "hollow." He drove out of the area and made a second, successful attempt to reach the police.

Later, while the uniformed officers cordoned off the copse, and the cows, irritated by the police activity, ambled to the far corner of the meadow, the man spoke with Detective Chief Inspector Hennessey of Micklegate Bar Police Station, City of York Police. It had been a busy weekend; three more bag-snatchings. The countryside made a welcome break.

"I'm not usually one for the old sixth sense." The man spoke cheerfully, leaning against his car. "But something drew me to the wood. It's called Deadman's Wood. Appropriate, don't you think?"

"Really . . ." Hennessey glanced at the wood. "It is appropriate, isn't it?"

"Yes, really. It's on my land, you see. I own this land, inherited it, and like every farmer, I walk my land when I can, just covering ground. I don't usually go into the woods; there are five small woodland areas on the farm. Shelter for game, you see, keeps the farm "alive," more ecologically healthy. We have eight hundred acres, so we can afford to give over a few acres to woodland, and we have kept the hedgerows, as you see. That keeps the topsoil on the land. I walk the crops, I walk the pastures to make sure all is well, but the woodlands, well, they look after themselves."

"But this morning, you felt drawn to Deadman's Wood?"

"Yes . . . as I said, I was driving round the farm, doing my rounds, I tend to do that as an excuse for putting off my paperwork, as I did this morning. I drove along the lane and I glanced at Deadman's Wood. A man was found there in Victorian times, so the story goes, hanging from a tree, apparent suicide, but he was a stranger, never identified. Given a name and buried in the churchyard at Ottery St. Nicholas. Actually it's not a story, it's fact, if you go to the library and look up the *York Courant* of eighteen thirty-four, you can read an account."

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"I'll give that a miss, but it looks like history is repeating itself." Hennessey looked at the wood again. "Except these days we have quite a success rate when it comes to identifying human remains. I take it you have no idea of his identity?"

"None, sorry. He's a townie, though, no countryman would wear shoes like that to walk these fields, too delicate. Don't recognise him from what little I saw. . . . I just took one look at the head, hair matted with black stuff which could only be blood, the stomach bursting out of the shirt . . . called three nines."

"Well, thanks. You can be reached at . . . ?"

"Brook Farm . . . it's in the book under Corbett."

Hennessey walked across the meadow towards the wood. As he walked, he allowed himself to enjoy the open country, the rich bounty of nature here in the Vale of York, the birdsong. He was a man who was approaching retirement from the police force, he was a man who had known loss in his life, and he took whatever opportunity he could to enjoy something, no matter how small, that each day sent his way. That day he enjoyed the song of English songbirds, particularly the blackbird he heard, the most melodious of all, as he walked across a green meadow dotted with yellow and white daisies. He reached the wood and the police constable on duty at the edge of the wood saluted Hennessey and lifted the blue and white tape to allow him to lean under. Hennessey nodded in response and entered the shade of the wood, whereupon he saw the tall figure of Yellich standing with two constables. He also saw the slender, short-haired figure of Louise D'Acre, dressed in lightweight green coveralls, who was at the moment kneeling, as if studying something on the ground.

"Morning, sir," Yellich said as Hennessey approached.

Louise D'Acre turned and held eye contact, briefly, with Hennessey, but remained stone-faced and returned her attention to the corpse.

"Massive head injuries," she said without turning. "See the blood in the hair? I can detect no other injuries at this stage. . . . I'll start the postmortem as soon as we get him back to the York City Hospital."

"Time of death?" Hennessey asked. "Can you offer something for us to work with?"

"Not really my province, Chief Inspector, pathologists giving time of death is a media invention." She stood. "Really our job stops once the cause of death is established. But looking at the corpse logically rather than scientifically, the few clothes, not dressed to be out at night, is he? He's a neat man, the chin stubble is postmortem, dead men continue to grow beards for a day or two after their heart has stopped . . . the bloating of the stomach in this heat, the flies laying eggs . . . about forty-eight hours after death the insect activity will move from the body to beneath the

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body, but here you see the flies are still on the body . . . so within the last forty-eight hours. But that's vague, deliberately so; I don't want a conviction to turn on my assessment of the time of death. Too many variables. In fact, in the tropics, body temperature rises after death. So forty-eight hours. About."

Hennessey glanced at his watch. "Eleven A.M.," he said aloud. "So between now and about eleven A.M. on Saturday."

Louise D'Acre smiled. "About," she repeated.

"He won't be difficult to identify." Hennessey glanced at the corpse. "Quite a small man, less than average height."

"Much less. Five feet, if that."

"Still with his watch . . . not a cheap-looking timepiece, either . . . no down-and-out, he . . . not murdered for money, either, that watch wouldn't be there if he was. Can't see any evidence of a struggle. Can you?"

"No flattening of the vegetation, that's for sure. He was probably carried here and dumped most unceremoniously."

"Vegetation looks undisturbed to my eye, too," Yellich offered. "Dumped, as Dr. D'Acre says. But then I'm a city lad, something would have to be well out of place in the country before I'd notice it."

"Me, too," Hennessey conceded. Though he was a long way in terms of both time and distance from his native southeast London, he was still a city dweller. It was his view that a person is either born to the country or he or she is not. And he was not.

"Well, I have finished here." Louise D'Acre knelt and snapped her black bag shut. "The body can be removed for my purposes, unless you have reason to detain it?"

"Yellich? All done?"

"All done and dusted, boss. Photographs taken from every angle, colour, black-and-white. We need to search the wood for a murder weapon or any other significant item, but the body can be removed."

"All right," Louise D'Acre said, "body-bag time."

As the corpse was removed and Dr. D'Acre walked towards her distinctive red and white car, Yellich and Hennessey stood talking.

"Saturday-night dustup, boss? Went too far?"

"Don't think so . . . a small guy. What do you think his age is, or was? Forties? . . . Bit old for pub fights. I think there's a story here. Was he carried here, lured here? . . . He certainly didn't expect to be going into the country, not by his clothes, he didn't."

The items of clothing and personal possessions taken from the body by Mr. Fry, the mortuary attendant, who, despite his job, managed to surprise all who met him by retaining a sense of humour and a look of genuine warmth in his eyes, were "bagged and tagged" and handed to the police. Hennessey and Yellich

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sifted through them. The clothing they laid to one side but took more note of the possessions: the watch, gold, expensive, and engraved "from Irene with love," and a wallet, with about two hundred pounds in paper money, and credit cards, six in all, in the name of "P. R. Ryan." Hennessey handed the items to Yellich, both contained in self-sealing cellophane sachets, and said, "Can you handle the ID? I have to attend the P.M."

One hour later Yellich was at his desk, catching up on paperwork, when his phone rang. He picked it up, paused, because he didn't want to sound snappy, and said, "DS Yellich."

"Collator, sir."

"Yes?"

"The information you requested."

"Yes?"

"Philip Robert Ryan, aged forty-seven years, was reported missing by his wife yesterday at seven-thirty P.M. His home address is given as The Stone House, Oakley Approach, Hawken Green."

"That's a village just to the north of York, isn't it?"

"I believe so, sir, quite pukka, I think, very green-wellie brigade, 'hunting, shooting, an' fishing,' as they say."

"Not far from where he was found, either," Yellich mused. "What is his occupation?"

"Given as that of accountant, sir." The collator paused. "Description given is that of a small man, slim, five feet one inch tall . . ."

"That's him. Dark hair?"

"Yes, sir, black hair . . . clean shaven. Why, have you located him?"

"In a manner of speaking. He appears to be deceased. Some bad news to break to someone. Have to tell Mrs. Irene Ryan that she is a widow. Possibly. Quite a young widow as well. Possibly."

An awful lot younger than even he had anticipated.

The woman wasn't right. Not right at all. Something wasn't right . . . no . . . no, it was more than that . . . it was more than that, everything was wrong.

Everything. But still he could not put his finger on what.

The policeman's bell of suspicion began to toll inside Yellich's head the moment he saw the woman, not a deafening and at the same time uplifting Sunday-morning peal of bells, not a

7 3 4 2 9 8 7
7 3 4 2 9 8 7
7 3 4 2 9 8 7

as the bellringers pulled each his rope in strict order and precise timing

7 3 4 2 9 8 7

every Sunday morning, all over England

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but rather, it was the tolling of a single bell, not loudly, but a distinct chime, from a distance, as if carrying a long way over fields on a still, frosty, starlit night, a bell which said: All . . . is . . . not . . . well.

There was, for instance, a clear absence of surprise when DS Yellich identified himself, accompanied by a female officer, a uniformed officer. The signal given out by Mrs. Irene Ryan being that they were expected. Similarly, there was no look of shock or distress when Yellich informed Mrs. Ryan that her husband "may have met with an accident." No display of emotion, just a matter-of-fact "I'll get my coat" when she was asked to accompany them to the hospital to identify the body. It was as if all was going to plan. So much so, so transparently so, that when Mrs. Ryan turned to get her coat Yellich turned to the female constable, who was just a girl of nineteen or so, and even she, despite her newness, held eye contact with Yellich, raised her eyebrows, opened her mouth, and shook her head slowly from side to side.

The oddly inappropriate matter-of-fact attitude of Mrs. Ryan continued in the car on the journey to the York City Hospital. It was as if for her the ride might have been nothing more than a journey into York for a normal Saturday morning shopping, followed by a pot of tea and a "Yorkshire fat rascal" at an eatery before driving home. And the viewing of the corpse—the parting of the curtain, the deceased lying bound up with bandages so that only his face was visible behind the glass, and by some sensitive and clever trick of light and dark looking as though he was floating, at peace, in space—was greeted with the words, "Yes, that's him . . . that's Philip." Still no display of emotion, as if all was still going to plan, as if the director was going to say, "Okay, cut . . . that's a wrap." The journey home, in smug silence, the getting out of the car with a cursory "Thank you for the ride home," walking strongly up to the front door and letting herself into the house as if that signalled the end of her small part in the costume drama.

And her appearance. Tall, six feet at least, made higher by heels. And aged, Yellich thought, about twenty-two or -three.

A tolling bell on a still, frosty, starlit night.

Louise D'Acre peeled off her latex gloves and stepped back from the corpse which lay on the stainless-steel table in the pathology laboratory of the York City Hospital. She turned to Hennessey. "So that's it," she said. She turned once again and surveyed the skull of the deceased, which had been laid bare by having the scalp peeled from it. "It's like a lot of crazy paving. Death was caused by multiple blows to the head by a linear instrument, rather than a pointed object."

"A poker rather than a hammer, you mean?"

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"Is a good way of putting it. He was a well-nourished male, enjoyed a good diet . . ."

"He was an accountant."

"I see. Well, that would fit the bill, definitely not long-term unemployed with a poor diet. His attacker would have been taller than he, which, given his height, would not be difficult. Either that or he attacked him when he was sitting. The line of the blows goes roughly from front to back rather than from side to side. There will be blood splatter in the place where the assault took place."

"If they haven't cleaned it."

"All you need is microscopic samples."

"As you say."

"I'll trawl for poisons just as a matter of course but I think that the most obvious is the cause of death: massive brain damage, subdural hematoma, blood reaching brain tissue following trauma to the skull."

"Thanks indeed." Hennessey smiled but Louise D'Acre refused eye contact.

"What did you make of the woman?" Hennessey sipped his tea and glanced out of the window of his office and watched a group of tourists walk the medieval wall at Micklegate Bar, no doubt at that moment being told by their guide that it was at Micklegate Bar that the severed head of Harry Hotspur was impaled and left to decay for three years before being removed, as a warning to any who would defy the Crown.

"Queer fish, skipper. I get the impression that she was expecting me. No sign of surprise. No sign of grief. All very calm and matter-of-fact." Yellich leaned back in his chair. "Like me and her were keeping to a script."

"Transparently suspicious?"

"In a word, boss. Or two words."

"What was the house like?"

"It spoke of money and lots of it. Built in an L shape, gravel drive, very well maintained, in Hawken Green."

"Hawken Green, they would be monied! Tell me, did the interior of the house smell of bleach, or cleaning chemicals?"

"I didn't go in. But no smell of that from the house, as we stood at the front door."

"I see. No matter."

"She's substantially younger than her husband was."

"Substantially? How substantially?"

"About twenty years."

"That is substantially younger. Did she seem to you like a lady eager to read her husband's will?"

"Muchly so, skipper."

"I think we should go and have a chat with her."

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With Yellich at the wheel, he and Hennessey drove out of York to Hawken Green. The Ryan household was, Hennessey saw, much as Yellich had described, L-shaped by floor plan, half-timbered, black timbers, white plaster, which put Hennessey immediately in mind of a similar house in Skelton. The house was surrounded by pink gravel, which ran from the house down the drive to a varnished five-barred gate which separated the property from the public highway. As Yellich had said, the house reeked of wealth, as did the white Rolls Royce which stood in the drive, close to the house.

"Wasn't here earlier." Yellich nodded to the Rolls Royce as he pulled up behind it.

"Interesting." Hennessey got out of the car. He never drove unless he had to, and he didn't remain inside motorcars any longer than he had to. The internal combustion engine had been responsible for one of the two great tragedies in his life and he could never understand humankind's love affair with what he believed to be the most dangerous machine ever invented, whether two wheels or four. The two officers crunched the gravel as they approached the front door and Hennessey, scanning the house, caught a glimpse of the curtains of an upstairs room twitching. The front door had no electric bell, such would be *infra dig* for Hawken Green. There was instead a circular black metal knocker. Hennessey reached for it and knocked on the door with the classic police officer's knock: *tap, tap . . . tap.*

The door was opened after a short delay by Mrs. Ryan, whose hair was uncombed and messy and whose clothing, shirt and jeans, appeared to have been hastily pulled on. She was barefoot. She seemed surprised to see Hennessey and Yellich, so much so that Hennessey commented on it.

"No . . . I'm not surprised," she stammered. "Just didn't expect the police to return again so soon."

"Soon?"

"Well, after this morning . . . after I identified my husband's body . . . I thought you'd be out looking for the man that did it."

"Man?" asked Hennessey.

"Did what?" asked Yellich. "All I said was that your husband might have met with an accident."

"Well . . ." she searched for words. "It's always a man, isn't it?"

"You'd be surprised." Yellich smiled. "Deadlier than the male, believe me."

"Well, what can I do for you?"

"We have a question or two, may we come in?"

"Well . . ." she glanced nervously behind her, "it's not really convenient."

"Mrs. Ryan, your husband has been murdered," Hennessey

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spoke coldly. "We are still pursuing a very warm trail. Time is critical if we are to catch the person responsible."

"Unless you don't want us to apprehend him. Or her," Yellich added. "For some reason."

Irene Ryan shot a glare at Yellich. Both officers saw it, and both knew then that Irene Ryan was their prime suspect.

"So, can we come in? Or shall we do this in the police station?" Irene Ryan turned angrily on her heels and strode back into her house, leaving the front door open. Hennessey and Yellich interpreted the open door as an invitation to enter and followed Mrs. Ryan, who they discovered had walked into her kitchen. It was a very modern kitchen, the officers noted, a cooker set in the wall and an island table as a permanent fixture in the middle of the floor, with dark wooden sides and tiles of pastel shades on the surface. The kitchen also smelled strongly of bleach.

Very strongly.

Eye-wateringly strongly.

"Been cleaning?" asked Hennessey.

"I like a clean kitchen." Irene Ryan levered herself onto a stool and sat at the table. "My mother always said a house emanates from the kitchen. If you keep the kitchen clean, the rest of the house will follow. So she said. Didn't really work. I grew up in a poky little terraced house in Holgate."

"Done well for yourself."

"I married for money." She ran her fingers through her hair. "So what? At least I'm honest enough to admit it. Sit down, why don't you?" Hennessey and Yellich each levered themselves onto a stool.

"Do you know of anyone who would want to murder your husband?"

"He was murdered, then?" She was growing cautious.

"Yes, he was."

"No, I don't. He had friends. . . . He had people that disliked him. But anyone who'd want to murder him . . ." She shook her head. "No, he was a harmless, pint-sized, inoffensive little man."

Upstairs a floorboard creaked. Hennessey and Yellich glanced at each other. Irene Ryan pretended not to have heard the sound.

"He was also a very wealthy man, judging by this house, and your reason for marrying him."

"Wealth? What's wealthy to some isn't wealthy to others, but I come from Holgate, remember, for me this house represents wealth, but it wouldn't impress the royal family."

"Your husband was in his forties?"

"He was forty-seven."

"A little older than you?"

"Exactly twenty years older, almost exactly to the day. I was born on the third of September, twenty years after he was born on the fifth. But that explains why I am not exactly the grieving

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widow cloaked in black; there was no emotional basis for our marriage. I am young, reasonably attractive, I can find another man. I don't fear for my future."

"You are the beneficiary of his will?"

"It hasn't been read yet, but I anticipate coming into money, yes. But we . . . that is, his brother and I, are going to the solicitor's tomorrow. His brother will inherit something, but I will have the lion's share."

"You mention that there was no emotional base for your marriage," Hennessey asked, "but did the arrangement work?"

"We had our ups and downs, but what marriage doesn't?"

Mine, thought Hennessey. It was always "up," the short time it lasted, up to the time his beautiful young wife dropped dead one hot afternoon. Sudden Death Syndrome was all the medics could offer.

"We had arguments . . . but we always shared the same bed."

"Latterly?"

"Latterly, lukewarm—had been warmer, had been colder."

Hennessey glanced out of the kitchen window. The garden was expansive, an ancient yew stood in the middle of the lawn. The house, Hennessey assumed, had been designed round an established tree. "Would your brother-in-law know of anyone who would want to murder your husband?"

"Why don't you ask him? I'll give you his address."

As they left the house, as the door was shut loudly and angrily behind them, Yellich noted the registration number of the white Rolls Royce which stood in the driveway. On the journey to visit Philip Ryan's brother, he radioed the registration number to Police Control, who rapidly informed him that it was registered to one Henry Stafford, of Duke's Row, York, with convictions for fraud. Aged thirty years.

"Well, well, well," Hennessey said. "A widow who grieveth not, a boyfriend 'visiting' her on the day her husband's body is found with the head bashed in, and who is a villain. This won't take us long, Yellich. My waters tell me."

"Hope you're right, sir. It's my weekend off. One weekend in six we get off, I make the most of mine."

"Doing anything?"

"Sara and I are taking Jeremy to the Lake District."

"How is he?"

"Coming along well. Too heavy to carry now, but he can go to the toilet himself and can count to twelve."

"Not bad."

"Well, it means he'll be able to count the candles on his cake at his next birthday."

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Anthony Ryan received Hennessey and Yellich into his home in Bishopthorpe. He seemed to Hennessey to be in a daze.

"So sudden," he said. He was a middle-aged man, balding, a little overweight, dressed very casually, and his appearance spoke of a man who was struggling, financially speaking. Head above water but only just. His mantelpiece was cluttered with framed family photographs: a wife and three children, so far as Hennessey could make out. "He was my younger brother, ten years younger. We were not close . . . not as close as we should have been . . . different incomes . . . as you can see. . . . I teach primary . . . never got a headship." He forced a smile. "I have compassionate leave this week, otherwise I'd be in front of a class of ten-year-olds now telling them about the Romans and Hadrian's Wall. Philip married late in life. Me and my wife, we married from the school uniform, but Philip was driven by the need for money . . . in fact, I'd say greed. And he made his money, pots of it. But he was still my brother and I loved him a lot."

"Do you know of anyone who would want to murder him?"

"I really can't . . . we were not close enough for him to tell me of any enemies." Anthony Ryan grimaced. "Poor Phil . . ."

"What was the state of his marriage?"

"Well, on the surface . . . and from what little we saw of them . . . all right . . . but you never know how much was show, how much was for appearances' sake. Meg, my wife, she didn't take to her, and Meg is very intuitive, very perceptive, told me she thought Irene was, what did she say? 'A gold-digging little minx.' Meg thought Irene wanted Philip for his money, his lifestyle. But Philip knew that and accepted it. Philip was very practical about things, very materialistic. . . . Meg and I have a spiritual dimension to our marriage, we are both churchgoers. Philip said that he was a rich man and a rich man needs a glamorous wife." Anthony Ryan grimaced again. "So many images, so many proverbs come to mind . . . 'poisoned chalice' . . . 'all that glistens is not gold' . . . but as to who would want to murder him, I really don't know."

Billy Napper slinked back into the snickelway. He liked the snickelways of old York. A street system within a street system, the snickelways were covered passages, sometimes open, wide enough for one person to walk down, as they twisted and turned through a series of blind corners, leading from one thoroughfare to another. Few go into the unlit snickelways at night, but Billy Napper did.

He was in Le Kyrk Lane, hiding just out of sight of pedestrians on High Ousegate, waiting for what he wanted to hear . . . the *click, click, click* of stiletto heels . . . then they came, not in a clattering group, but a single pair.

Click, click, click.

His palms grew sweaty, his heart raced. . . . It was just another

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bag-snatch, he'd done it before, so often, so successfully . . . grab the bag, bolt down the snickelway . . . out into the next street . . . easy, easy, orange peelie. . . .

The woman approached.

He waited until she had gone past.

He stepped out behind her.

He grabbed the bag from her shoulders.

She screamed.

He ran down the snickelway.

She screamed and screamed.

Billy Napper ran down the passage towards its exit on Peter Lane, then he'd go to Market Street, into a pub, into the toilets of a pub, rifle the contents of the handbag, take what he wanted, cash mostly . . . sometimes an item of jewellery was to be found . . . then he'd leave the bag in the toilet bowl, flush the toilet to remove his fingerprints, then walk out of the pub. Easy, easy.

The two cops were in Peter Lane.

They heard the screams.

They heard the footsteps in Le Kyrk Lane, running towards them. They glanced at each other and waited, one either side of the entrance of the lane, and Billy Napper ran into the arms of the law.

Literally.

TUESDAY

Billy Napper sat nervously in the room. He pulled desperately on the cigarette. "I can't go back inside . . . I can't . . . even just one night in the cells." He paused. "I needed cash."

"We all do." Hennessey spoke softly.

"They laugh at me."

"Who?"

"All the lads and lassies in the estate."

"Why?"

"They call me 'insect.' I reckon if I could get enough cash for a bike, say a five-hundred cc . . . I'd be somebody."

Hennessey looked at Billy Napper. He was nineteen, he looked about thirteen, he even had the fresh-faced complexion of a schoolboy.

"And you think a motorbike would solve that problem?"

"Yes, I thought I'd get a bit of respect."

"So this is what all this has been about. You're a one-man crime wave. Do you know how many bags you've snatched over a three-month period?"

"Lost count."

"Oh, we kept count. This last one was number forty-three. That's nearly one every two days. Always the same M.O. So we put cops at the end of likely snickelways, knowing we'd catch you in the

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end. That's why you put the bags in the toilet bowls and flushed them, to destroy your prints?"

"Yes. I wore gloves but occasionally I took my gloves off."

"All for a motorbike."

Billy Napper shrugged.

"You know, Billy, my elder brother was killed on one of those things. He was eighteen. Younger than you are now. It's easy for an old man to say, but you should value what you've got, rather than try to change it."

"What have I got?"

"You live in the west, that's a head start over most of humanity, you've got intelligence, using the snickelways like you've done takes original thought."

Billy Napper smiled. Compliments were strange to his ears.

"You're going down for this, but inside you should make use of that intelligence, start an education. Don't worry about what the wolves on the estate think of you, they're heading nowhere . . . the time for you to turn yourself round is now."

"Prison . . ." Billy Napper seemed to Hennessey to be close to tears. He could understand his fear. "I want to deal."

"Deal?" Hennessey sat forward.

"I have information you want."

"About?"

"The murder. The guy in Deadman's Wood. It was on the news."

"Tell me what you know."

"Drop the charges, let me go . . . and I'll tell you who did it."

"No. We don't do that."

"I can't go down. . . ."

"The best you can do is plead guilty. Tell me what you know about the murder of Mr. Ryan and we can tell the judge that you helped us in another serious matter. It may get you a reduced sentence."

"That all? I'll still go down?"

"It's the best offer you'll get. But if we solve the murder and we find proof that you have withheld information, you'll be done for obstruction. You could even be seen as an accessory. That is serious time. If you go down as an accessory to murder you'll have a postgraduate degree by the time you come out."

"I saw who did the murder."

"You saw it?"

"Not the murder . . . didn't see that."

"What *did* you see?"

"Well, bag-snatching was getting risky, thought I'd start to turn windows . . ."

"Billy . . ."

"Well, I sighted up a few houses, saw one in Hawken Green, it

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had gravel all round it . . . this guy says you can use gravel to your advantage."

"Which guy?"

"Not telling you. Anyway, he said it makes folks feel secure because they believe nobody can walk on gravel without making a noise . . . but you can . . . if you do it slow, really slow, let your weight transfer from one foot to the other really slowly . . . anyway, I did and it works. Made it to the shrubbery, lay there, in the shadows, just watching the house, when a van pulled up on the drive, crunching the gravel. A white van."

"White?"

"Fella got out, holding a poker, walked up to the house, knocked on the knocker, a small guy opened the door, fella with the poker pushed him back, the small guy ran into the house, the bigger guy followed him. . . . I heard shouting and banging, pots and pans being thrown, sounded like, anyway, then the guy . . . the guy with the van came out, carrying the small guy in his arms like a babe and put him in the back of his van. Then a woman came to the door and said, 'I'll clean up . . . you take him somewhere.'"

"Then?"

"When the van drove off I waited then crept back over the gravel and legged it."

"Would you recognise the man and the woman again?"

"Yes."

"And identify them?"

"Yes."

"Give evidence for the Crown?"

"Yes." Billy Napper smiled. "I may be a thief, but I've got a sense of right and wrong . . . never hurt anyone . . . murder is bad. That is bad. And there was writing on the side of the van. 'Henry Stafford, Builders Supplies.'"

Hennessey smiled. "Billy, you've just earned yourself a reduced sentence. A much-reduced sentence."

That evening, after feeding and exercising his dog, George Hennessey packed an overnight bag and drove to Skelton. He parked his car in the road beside a half-timbered black and white house, walked noisily up the gravel drive, and knocked gently on the door. The door was opened by a slender, short-haired young woman, who smiled at him. Hennessey returned the smile.

"Come in," said Louise D'Acre. ●

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PASSPORT TO CRIME

THE PRECISION OF THE AGENT OF DEATH

by Isaka Kōtaro

Translated from the Japanese by Beth Cary.

A lawyer by training, Isaka Kōtaro is also one of Japan's most promising young mystery writers. His debut novel, *Prayer of Audupon* (2000), won the Shinchosha Mystery Club Award, and it was followed by two novels that were both short-listed for the Naoki Prize for popular fiction. For a subsequent novel, *Coin Locker of Ducks,* the author won the Yoshikawa Eiji Literary Award. The following story took 2004's prize given by the Mystery Writers of Japan for best short story.

1.

A while back a barber told me, "I'm not interested in hair.

"You see," he said, "I go snip, snip with my scissors, without any break, from the time I open my shop in the morning until I close it at night. Of course it feels good to get my clients' hair tidied up, but it's not as if I really like handling hair."

He would die five days later, stabbed in the stomach by a passing stranger. Blind to his future, he sounded cheerful.

"Why are you a barber, then?" I asked.

He replied with a rueful smile, "Because it's my job."

I felt the same. To put it in more grandiose terms, this was my philosophy. I'm not that interested in people's deaths.

It means nothing to me if a young president riding eleven miles an hour in a convertible in a motorcade is shot by a sniper, or if a young boy and his beloved dog freeze to death in front of a painting by Rubens.

I remember that same barber once saying, "I'm afraid of dying."

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And I asked him, "Do you remember the time before you were born?"

"No," he said, puzzled.

"Did you feel fear before you were born? Any pain?" I continued to press him.

"No."

"Isn't that what dying is about? You go back to the state before you were born. There's no fear or pain, you know."

There is no special meaning to a person's death. Everyone's death has the same value. That is why I have no interest in who dies or when. Yet, I go out again and again to investigate. Why? Because, just as the barber said, it's my job.

I stood in front of the twenty-story office building of an electronic-appliances manufacturer. It was about one hundred meters from the main street that led to the train station. The entire surface of the building shone like glass, reflecting the pedestrian bridge and emergency stairway across the way. It was an impressive facade. I stood to the side of the main entrance, self-consciously hanging on to my closed umbrella.

The clouds above my head were black, swollen and muscular. Rain was falling. Not a driving rain, but tenacious. It seemed like it would never let up.

When I am on a job, I never have good luck with the weather. I used to think that bad weather came with the job because I dealt with death. But my colleagues have better luck. I guess it's merely coincidence.

I looked at my watch. It was just past six-thirty. According to the schedule the Information Department had given me, my target should be appearing any minute now. Just then she came out the automatic door.

I took my electronic organizer out of my coat pocket and checked her description. It said she was twenty-two years old—it wasn't a mistake—but she didn't look that age. I returned the organizer to my pocket and began to follow her.

She seemed unhappy beneath her transparent umbrella. She was tall enough and didn't seem overweight, but those were her only positive qualities. Her shoulders were stooped, she was bow-legged, and she stared down at the ground as she walked. She didn't appear to be healthy. Even her dark black hair wasn't sexy; she'd tied it plainly at the back of her neck. But the most depressing thing was the glum expression on her face. It was not just the rain that made her seem wrapped in gray.

I don't insist that a woman wear makeup, but she seemed to do nothing to adorn herself. The suit she wore was nondescript, certainly not a designer label.

I had to lengthen my stride to follow behind her. There should

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be a subway entrance about twenty meters ahead. That was where I had been directed to make contact.

As with all my jobs, I wanted to get this over with quickly; I do just what I need to do, nothing extra. That's my style.

2.

I closed my umbrella as I started down the subway stairs. I shook it a few times to get rid of the water. Since she happened to be standing right in front of me, mud from the umbrella splashed onto her slacks.

"Oops," I said, raising my voice. There was more water than I'd expected.

I ducked my head and looked down as she turned around. "I'm sorry," I said, "I splashed some mud on your slacks. . . ."

She twisted and tugged slightly at her slacks to survey the damage. She found a circle of mud the size of a quarter and looked up again with some confusion.

I thought she might be angry—of course, she had every right to be annoyed—but she only seemed bewildered. She turned to continue down the stairs. Flustered, I moved to block her way.

"Wait a minute." I offered, "I'd like to pay for the cleaning."

The Information Department had instructed that, on this assignment, I was to dress like a twenty-two-year-old male model. I was supposed to look attractive to young women, but I hadn't checked to see if I'd been successful. The department had selected me for this assignment because I fit the type that the target would find easy to work with. I was pretty sure that my appearance wasn't disagreeable, but my offer of money might have startled her.

She said something like "That's all right" or "It doesn't matter," but it was so soft and mumbled that I couldn't catch it all.

"Wait a minute," I said, and automatically reached for her arm. I stopped myself and pulled back immediately.

I had forgotten to wear gloves. We are not allowed to touch human bodies with our bare hands. It is forbidden except in emergencies. That's the regulation. Those who violate this rule are forced to do a stint of physical labor and undergo educational retraining.

I think this type of minor violation is about as dangerous as people scattering cigarette butts or crossing the street against traffic lights. The regulations shouldn't be so restrictive. But I have never said anything. Although I may disagree, I always follow the rules.

"I just can't let you go, after I've soiled your expensive suit," I said.

"You say it's expensive, but the whole outfit was only ten thousand yen." I could finally hear what she said. "Are you being sarcastic?"

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"It doesn't look that inexpensive." Actually, it did look cheap. "If that's so, then even more, I can't let it go. You can't get such a good deal on a suit every day, can you?"

"The dirt doesn't matter," she said in a gloomy voice. "It's not going to change anything if I have a drop or two of mud on my suit."

That's true, I think to myself. *Your life won't change because of a spatter of mud on your clothes. You'll be dead a week from now, anyway.* Of course, I don't say this aloud.

"How about this, then? As an apology, will you let me take you to dinner?"

"What?" Her expression conveyed that she'd never had such an invitation before.

"I know a good restaurant. I couldn't go there alone, but I've always wanted to eat there. It would help me out if you'd come with me."

She stared at me, cautious. Human beings are extremely suspicious. They are so afraid of being tricked, and yet they are easily fooled. They are beyond saving. No, I don't even feel like saving them.

"Where are the others hiding?" she asked in a brittle way.

"What?"

"They're hiding somewhere, laughing at me, aren't they? I bet you're pretending to pick me up while they make fun of my reactions." She spoke in a monotone, as if reciting a mantra.

"Pick you up?" I hadn't expected this reaction.

"I may not be attractive, but I'm not bothering anyone, so please leave me alone."

She tried to move forward. At that moment, I inadvertently grabbed her shoulder, bare-handed. It was too late when I realized my mistake. She turned only her face toward me and, as if she had seen the agent of death—which in fact she had—she turned pale, the blood drained from her face, and she collapsed weakly to the ground.

Now I've done it, I thought. *It's too late for regrets.* I could only pray that no one from the Surveillance Department had seen me.

I took my gloves out of my pocket and slipped them on. Then I held on to her and lifted her up from the ground.

3.

"This really isn't a practical joke?" Sitting across the table from me, she was still half full of doubt.

Her voice was hard to hear, so I leaned toward her. We were at a table in a Russian restaurant. I had somehow managed to lift her out of her faint and had taken advantage of her semiconscious state to guide her into the restaurant.

"It's not a practical joke. I just wanted to apologize to you."

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"Oh." Her expression softened, and she blushed. "Is that so?"

"I was surprised that you fainted so suddenly." I feigned ignorance as I couldn't possibly explain that she had fainted because I'd touched her with my bare hands.

It wasn't necessary for me to tell her the truth: When we touch you with our bare hands your life span shortens by one year. Still, since she was probably going to die soon, a long life span wasn't at issue.

"It's the first time I've fainted. I've always been physically tough."

I wished she would speak more clearly. Her soft, mournful voice put off the listener.

In a small voice, she asked, "Um, what is your name?"

"Chiba," I responded. When we're first sent out on a job, we're given a specific name. It's always the name of a city or town, and it stays with us, even though our appearance and age will differ for each assignment. It's like a code to make it easier to remember.

"What is your name?"

"Fujiki Kazue."

She explained that the characters for Kazue meant "one wish." I'd gotten her data from the Information Department when I received this assignment, so I already knew her name. But I pretended I was hearing it for the first time.

"My parents told me that they named me Kazue in the hope that I would have at least one talent. It's funny, isn't it?"

"Funny?"

"They must have had no idea that their daughter would grow up without any talents at all."

She said this not to generate sympathy but out of the resentment she felt.

"I'm not easy to look at," she said after taking a bite of the egg dish in front of her.

I misheard what she said. "Not easy to see?" I leaned back, squinted my eyes, and said, "No, you're easy to see. You're not hard to see."

At this, she burst out laughing. It was as if a spotlight had shone on her face for the first time. If only for an instant, she brightened up.

"That's not what I meant. I meant I'm not attractive."

"Oh, I see," I said, but I couldn't contradict her. Just as she said, she was homely.

She then asked me my age.

"Twenty-two," I replied. My age was fixed to be the same as hers.

"You seem mature for your age." She seemed admiring.

"I hear that often from people." This was actually true. Even my colleagues often said, "You seem mature" or "You're cold." In real-

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ity, I don't like to get excited unnecessarily, and I'm no good at expressing my emotional ups and downs. I also feel strongly that, when I'm on an assignment, I shouldn't speak informally.

She then began to talk about her work. Her voice was still hard to hear, but her tongue seemed to have become looser. It was due more to the beer she guzzled than to feeling more at ease with me.

She told me she worked at the headquarters of a large electronic-appliances manufacturer.

"That's first-rate. I'm impressed," I said as enviously as I could.

"But I'm in the complaints department." She frowned, and looked even more unattractive. "It's the kind of job no one wants."

"Complaints department?" I said.

"I get calls from customers. Their calls are first taken by the customer service department, but those with angry complaints are routed to me. I'm a specialist in dealing with difficult complaints, I suppose."

"It must be depressing."

"Yes, it is." Her shoulders slumped as she nodded. "It really gets me down. I only hear from people who have complaints. Some of them yell, others go on and on in a mean way, or they actually threaten me. I have to respond to those kinds of people. It nearly drives me crazy."

This is good, I said to myself. "Are your days tough?" I asked.

"No," she shook her head and said, "my days are more than tough."

"That bad?" I tried to look sympathetic.

"I may be like this now, but when I'm on the telephone at work I use a very cheerful voice. I feel bad for the person calling. But when the customer keeps attacking me, I get depressed."

Her voice sounded so damp, like mud bubbling on the surface of a swamp, that I couldn't imagine her speaking cheerfully on the telephone.

"Recently, an especially weird customer has been calling me."

"Really?"

"He asks for me specifically to complain."

"For you specifically?"

"There are five women in the complaints department, and the calls are routed randomly, but this person asks for me by name."

"How awful." I could imagine that a complaining customer with a stalker-like mentality could be quite nasty.

"It's too awful." She hung her head as she gazed at me with lifeless eyes and smiled wanly. "I almost want to die."

That's good. Your wish is going to be granted. I nearly spoke out loud.

4.

"What do you enjoy doing when you're not working? Like on your

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days off?" I asked, even though I was not interested. I asked because it was my job to ask.

"On my days off?" she repeated, as if she had never heard such a silly question. "I don't do anything. Just housework. And maybe toss coins."

She seemed to be drunk. Her words were slurring, and her body slumped.

"Toss coins?"

"I think to myself, if it's heads I'll lead a happy life, and toss a ten-yen coin. It's a simple way of fortunetelling." She seemed to have gone beyond self-mockery and on to enlightenment. "But it usually comes up tails. Then I decide that on the next toss tails will bring happiness, and toss the coin."

"Then it comes up heads?"

"Right."

"Aren't you reading too much into it?"

"If one is forsaken by even a fifty-fifty chance, one must lose one's will to live, no?" She drank the last of her beer. "Things are the same whether I'm here or not, so it doesn't make any difference if I die, does it?"

"If you die, many people will be sad." I offered the first platitude that came to mind.

She slumped to one side and said, "There is one person. The guy who insists on picking me to complain to." Then she smiled and gave a shrill laugh.

"I see." I thought, *This is going well.*

"I really just want to die since I don't have anything good in my life."

Again, she spoke of death.

Even if we don't encourage them to, those we are assigned to often talk about death. They talk of feeling trepidation, or of longing, or as if they had a vast knowledge about death. They speak little by little as if they were looking out from the shadows into an ever deeper darkness.

This must be because people sense our real identity in a subconscious way. Anyway, that is what they taught us during training.

And in actuality, since ancient times there seem to have been people who sensed our true nature. Some have claimed, "I felt a chill down my spine"; and others have written of premonitions: "I have the feeling that I am going to die soon." Those rare people who sense our presence in an acute way sometimes use this ability to tell others' fortunes.

"You shouldn't speak so casually of your own death," I told her, though I didn't believe it.

"There's no reason to continue living when all I hear day after day are complaints, and I don't have anything positive in my life. I'm the one who would like to file a complaint about my own life."

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It was hardly an insightful comment.

I stifled what I would have liked to say, that there was no purpose to life in the first place.

"I wonder if there is such a thing as fate?" she asked. I thought that she couldn't hold her liquor well. She seemed even more depressed than when we'd sat down.

Based on the data I'd received, I thought that she had probably never had dinner alone with a man before. Perhaps her nervousness and excitement had made her drink too fast.

"Sure, there is fate," I responded. "But I guess we might not all die at the time fate demands."

She giggled at this. "That's nonsense. Fate determines when a person dies, doesn't it? It's strange to say that someone might die before fate demanded."

"It would be a big problem if everyone waited to die until fate took a hand."

I shouldn't have been giving out this much information, but knowing that she was on the way to becoming very drunk, I continued. "Things would get out of balance."

"What balance are you talking about?"

"The world's balance, like population and the environment."

"But don't people die when their time is up?"

"No. They may die before their time is up. A sudden accident or an unforeseen crime—in those cases it's usually not as fated. Like a fire, or earthquake, or drowning. Accidents are determined afterward, separate from personal fate."

"Who determines them?" Her eyelids were starting to droop.

I thought of answering truthfully, "The god of death," but I considered this to be too negative, so instead I answered, "Probably the gods." As the god of death was included in the term "gods," I hadn't lied completely.

"I don't believe it." She laughed merrily. "If there are gods, why don't they save me?" Her voice, louder now, was clear, and it surprised me. In that instant, her voice sounded beautiful. "What standards do the gods of death use to decide who will die?"

"That I don't know," I answered truthfully. I really had no idea what standards or policies were used to select our targets. Those decisions were handled by a different department. I merely did what the department told me to do.

"But it would be unbearable, wouldn't it, to meet with an accident or something based on an arbitrary decision?"

"I suppose so."

"It would be distressing if the decision wasn't made after a thorough investigation, wouldn't it?" she said in a singsong voice. Then, with a thud, her face dropped onto the table.

It's just as you say, I nodded vigorously to myself. *That is precisely why I have come to see you. I was sent to investigate you in*

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order to determine and report on whether you are fit for the implementation of "death." That was my job.

The investigation process wasn't that involved. I only had to contact the target a week before the termination date and listen two or three times to what the person had to say. Then I would note down whether the determination was "approve" or "pass over." Moreover, the criterion for either decision was left up to individual agent discretion, making this investigation pretty much pro forma. Unless there was something very unusual, we were expected to report "approve."

"Ahh, I just want to die," I could hear her mutter as if she were talking in her sleep, her cheek against the table.

5.

After I sent her home in a taxi, I walked through the shopping arcade late into the night. My steps were light because I felt that this assignment was going smoothly. My job was actually pretty carefree. As long as one didn't get tired of changing into human form and meeting with people, all one had to do was engage in a bit of conversation and fill out the report. Then it was over. It didn't require much involvement with colleagues, and once in the field, it was left up to me to do things my own way. So it suited me well.

I went into a CD shop. CD shops that were open late at night were a valuable resource, so I always located them in the neighborhood before I went out on a job.

It was past eleven P.M., but there were a few customers here and there in the shop. I glided past the shelves and moved toward the headphones. The greatest pleasure in doing this job was being able to listen to music. The melody flowing from the headphones into my ears was so fresh, so thrilling. It was quite wonderful.

I don't care about people dying, but it would be hard on me if people became extinct because there would be no more music to listen to.

I suddenly noticed someone—a middle-aged man already wearing headphones. It was a colleague.

I tapped his shoulder.

He had his eyes closed, as if enraptured by sound. He jerked and turned toward me. Then he took off his headphones and smiled. "Hey."

"Is your target in this area, too?" I asked.

"Yeah, though today is my last day."

"Have you finished your report? Or have you witnessed the end?"

"I witnessed the end," he said as he raised his shoulders. "He fell off the subway platform on his way home, drunk."

After our week-long investigation, we send our verdict to the department. If the verdict is "approve"—and most of them are—death occurs the following day. Once we witness the death, our

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job is over.

Incidentally, we are not informed beforehand how our target will die. We only find out the method when we see it happen.

"So this is your last chance to listen before you go back?" I said as I pointed to the headphones.

"I guess so. I don't know when my next time will be," he said as he smiled.

While we are on assignment, we go to listen to music at CD shops whenever we get the chance. If you ever see a customer under the headphones absorbed in listening, with no intention of leaving the shop, it might be me or one of my colleagues.

I had a chance to go to a movie once; it depicted angels as gathering in libraries. I was struck with admiration that, for angels, it was the library. For us it's the CD shop.

"This album is the greatest." He held out the headphones. I put them on. A pleasant-sounding female vocalist was singing a tune, something between pop and rock.

I agreed with him and handed back the headphones. We loved music so much, if we weren't careful, instead of enjoying music during work breaks, we'd be working only during music breaks.

In a slightly arrogant tone, my colleague began to talk about the music. "The producer of this album is someone you should pay attention to." He went on and on about how the producer was a genius.

"But isn't this music good because the singer's voice is good?" I responded. "It doesn't have anything to do with the producer."

"Sure, the voice has to be good. The producer knows that. It's natural aptitude and talent. That's exactly it."

"Exactly what?"

"The reason the producer who discovered the singer's voice is so great."

I responded vaguely that it might be so. Maybe my imagination was working overtime, but I wondered if my colleague identified with the producer, who works in the background, because his own jobs were always unexciting.

"And you?" He gestured toward me with his chin.

"I just started my investigation today. But, fortunately, it looks like a simple case," I said as I recalled Fujiki Kazue's face.

"Simple case or no, you've already decided to 'approve' from the beginning, I bet."

"I'm intending to give it serious thought before making my decision," I asserted. "I want to gather as much information as I can and make the correct determination." That is the way I am.

"But, in the end, it will be 'approve,' won't it?" He smiled.

"Well, I guess so," I acknowledged. That was the reality. "But I consider myself someone who takes his work fairly seriously."

"Fairly, right?"

"Yes, fairly." I nodded as I picked up the headphones next to him.

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I put them on and pressed the Play button.

The fellow raised his hand to say, "See you," and left the shop.

Whether it's jazz, rock, punk, or classical, music is the best. I get happy just listening to music. I expect my colleagues feel the same way. Just because we're agents of death doesn't mean that we like only heavy metal with a skull on the jacket cover.

6.

In the evening two days later I met Fujiki Kazue again. Of course, it was raining.

I waited for her outside her building, and I began following her as she walked out of the automatic door. A car splashed water from a puddle on the street. It sounded like a crashing wave.

She seemed to be in more of a hurry than before, making it hard for me to keep up with her. When I caught up, I stretched out my gloved hand and tapped her on her right shoulder.

Her body tensed as she turned around. Her response was so exaggerated—what one might expect if one spilled hot water on a cat—it was I who felt nonplussed.

Pressed against the wall, she looked at my face and let out a small "Oh," as her expression turned to one of relief.

It appeared she wasn't frightened of me.

"Actually," I said, taking her handkerchief from my pocket, "I wanted to return this."

"Oh, that's mine."

"Yes, you lent it to me when I spilled some beer the other day."

"Oh, really?" Her expression gloomy, she cocked her head.

It was a lie on my part. In reality, I had taken the handkerchief out of her pocket when I put her in the taxi.

"Oh, thank you for the other evening. I don't remember much of it." Her words were jumbled, and she nodded her head several times.

"Can we talk a bit?"

She glanced around and seemed more wary of something than concerned about being seen with me. So I hesitated a little and asked, "Maybe it's inconvenient for you?"

"N-No." She shook her head. "But he might be around."

"Who?"

"I may have told you before—the customer who makes the complaint calls."

I understood right away. "You mean the man who asks for you when he calls to complain?"

"Yes, him," she said in a faint voice. "He called again today, and asked to meet me."

"That's scary."

"I thought he might be nearby."

With this, I immediately hailed a taxi and we went to another part of town. I thought she might consider me too forward and

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refuse to come along, but fortunately she didn't resist. When we walked into a coffee shop neither of us had been in before, her shoulders relaxed and she said, "This place should be safe."

"That complaining customer is creepy." I followed her lead in conversation. It wasn't as if I really needed her to talk about it, but if I realized how burdened she felt every day, it would be helpful to me. It would give me some criteria for my decision, and, most of all, listening to her problems gave me a sense of satisfaction that I was getting work done.

"At first, it was a complaint that the Eject button on his video player was broken."

"You should speak up a little more," I said before I realized I had spoken aloud.

"What?"

"When you speak in such a faint voice, it sounds like you're depressed." She should at least try to speak in an upbeat way, I thought. Then her sense of darkness might lessen to dimness, at least.

"I force myself to speak in a cheerful way when I'm at work."

I would hope so, I thought. If she spoke in such a gloomy way, the customers might issue further complaints.

"The customers who get routed to me are usually those with minor complaints, so I listen to them attentively and just keep apologizing. All I say over and over again is 'We apologize,' 'We apologize.'"

"It makes me feel depressed just imagining that," I said.

"At first that customer was the same. But then he started saying weird things. He would suddenly say, 'Apologize again.'"

"Again?"

"Yes, 'Apologize again.' Of course I would apologize, but he would repeat his demand, insisting I apologize over and over. In the end, he would ask me to say something, and get angry if I didn't comply."

"He might get his sexual kicks from hearing a woman apologize," I said noncommittally.

Perhaps she was naive, because she blushed at the word "sexual." It was unfortunate that she was so unattractive.

"Finally, he hung up that day. But he called again the next day. This time it was about a television set."

"Television set?"

"He said the picture got narrower and narrower and faded away. I told him that we would send someone out to repair it, but he said that didn't matter, he wanted me to explain the cause of the problem."

"The cause of the problem?"

"There's no way that I could know the cause."

"That's not your job."

"Right, I'm in the complaints department. I've never even seen

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the television set. Then he insisted that I talk about anything, louder and clearer."

"It must be that it didn't matter what the topic was, he wanted to keep talking to you." When I said that, she looked disgusted.

"Next it was a radio-cassette player."

"Music!" I muttered, and realizing what I had said, I felt embarrassed. To cover up, I continued, "So his radio-cassette player broke?"

"That must have been a lie as well." Her face twisted in disbelief. "He said he couldn't get his CD out, and started singing the song."

"Sounds weird."

"Don't you think? Then he asked if I knew that song, and insisted that I sing it."

"It might be the customer's head that needs repairing."

"I got scared and kept apologizing. But he said I should obey him."

"That's vicious. Then, he said he wanted to meet you?"

"Yes," she said weakly, and looked down. "After he called to complain about his broken DVD player, he said he wanted to meet me somewhere."

"Maybe he took a liking to you."

"Me?" She seemed not to have considered that at all, and was quite surprised.

"He may have been completely taken by your response to his complaints." If so, would she not want to die? I worried.

"I can't imagine." She seemed a bit taken aback, and showed a bit of pleasure, but then regained her composure. "It doesn't make me feel good to be liked by such a weirdo."

"I guess not." I was relieved.

If she fell in love with a wonderful man, it seemed I would have to reconsider whether I would "approve" her. Whether or not I was going to recommend a "pass over," it seemed I needed to reconsider her case.

However, I was probably being overanxious. I couldn't imagine that a complaining customer who seemed like a pervert could make her happy, or that the future of a couple made up of a complainer and a depressed woman would be sunny.

She fell silent. Wondering if I should make conversation, I gazed out the window at a pedestrian frowning under an umbrella. The puddles in the sidewalk highlighted the uneven pavement.

"We've had a lot of rain lately," she said, seeming to follow my gaze.

"Whenever I'm working it rains," I confided.

"So you're a rain man." She smiled.

I couldn't tell what was so humorous. It brought to mind a question I had harbored for a long time.

"Is the abominable snowman the same thing?"

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"What?"

"Is the abominable snowman a man who, whenever he does anything, it snows?"

She burst out laughing, clapped her hands, and said, "That's funny."

It wasn't funny to me. I was uncomfortable having my serious statement mistaken for humor. And, since I didn't understand why it was so funny, I didn't know how to continue the conversation. I often have this kind of experience, and it's annoying.

After a while, she murmured, "What is my life about, anyway?"

Whatever she had been holding back had boiled over.

This startled me. I saw the color of her eyes change. She was like a woman who had fallen down a hole and couldn't get out and was begging for someone to let down a rope.

I wondered if she was seeking my help. She seemed to hope that this man sitting in front of her could rescue her from her worthless life. I must have quite an attractive appearance on this job.

This was not a happy situation, unfortunately, because I could be of no help to her.

Some of my colleagues work so that their targets might have some happy feelings, even for a short time, since they are going to be dead in a week's time anyway. But that isn't my style.

That would be the same as adorning your hair just before a haircut. If it's going to be cut anyway, it is meaningless to do something with it.

The barber can't save people's hair, and I cannot save her. That's all there is to it.

7.

For four days after that, I hardly did anything that could be called work. I did not contact Fujiki Kazue until I received a telephone call from the Inspection Department. To be strictly accurate, I had done no work at all.

I had spent those four days listening to music at CD shops until the staff looked at me with suspicion. Then I wandered the parks late at night and watched young thugs assault salary men. The rest of the time I spent reading music magazines at bookstores.

In one magazine I read an interview with the "genius" producer that my colleague had spoken of so enthusiastically the other day. I didn't know his name, but I'd listened to several of the CDs he had produced. As I recalled, all of them were masterpieces, and I wondered if he might be a genius after all.

One of his comments involved the word "death." The word caught my eye. "I am waiting to come across a true new talent before my death." I was envious of his vitality and what seemed to be an unshakable confidence. I had no plans to quit my job, but I did not have the kind of zeal that this producer had. It made me

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realize again that what I lacked was passion for my work.

The call from the Inspection Department came just as I had pressed the button on the listening station. I hurried out of the store to take the call.

"How is it going?" I was asked. Someone calls us at irregular intervals, as if randomly checking to see how hard we are working.

"I'm working on it," I replied vaguely. Even to me, my reply lacked enthusiasm.

"If you can already write up your report, get it done as soon as you can." This was the usual line they took.

"It might take until the last minute." This was also my usual reply. It was a lie, of course. I could submit my report right now. Whether it was Fujiki Kazue or anyone else, it was just a matter of filling in "approve" and submitting it. Yet, those of us in the Investigation Department didn't work that way. We walked around town as human beings until the very last minute. Why do we do this? Probably because we want to enjoy listening to music until our time is up.

"How does it look?" the caller asked.

"It's probably an 'approve.'"

As the conversation ended, I thought I should go see Fujiki Kazue again. It was not really a final confirmation, but it was customary in my work to say goodbye to the target just before writing the report. It was this convention that I was concerned to uphold.

She came out of the company building at her usual time. It might have been mere fancy on my part, but her shoulders seemed even more slumped than before, and she looked like someone who would soon die.

She held an umbrella against the drizzling rain as she hurried away.

Again, I followed her, and I wondered how I should approach her this time. It might be good to meet by coincidence in the subway. A crowded subway car would be a convenient stage to engage in casual conversation, and it would be easy to say goodbye when I left the train.

But, contrary to my expectation, she walked past the entrance to the subway and went on across the intersection.

Beyond the tree-lined avenue of famous brand-name stores was a run-down area, a covered street mall crowded with people. It was full of game centers and fast-food stores. The scrape of loud noises sullied the air.

She stopped at a small fountain set in the middle of the mall and sat on a nearby bench. Her head tucked down, she clutched a women's fashion magazine to her chest. She didn't read it. I guessed that she was waiting for someone. The magazine must be a signal to someone who didn't know her.

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I was surprised that she was meeting someone. Who was it? It was unlikely to be a friend or acquaintance.

It occurred to me that it might be the complainer she had talked about. She may have gotten fed up with her dull routine and decided to take a chance on anything that might give her even a small possibility of change. Or, it might have been that she'd decided that even if it wasn't a change for the better, any change, no matter how painful, would be preferable to a boring life with no variation. So, she decided to meet the complainer even though he seemed to be a pervert. Yes, she could have decided that.

As I was mulling this over, a middle-aged man approached the bench where she sat. He was in his early forties. His hair was down to his shoulders and wavy from a permanent, and he wore tinted sunglasses. He was of average height and weight, dressed in black. Right away I could tell that he wasn't in a respectable business.

I walked quietly and leaned against the wall of a building so as not to be in the way of people passing by and watched what happened.

The man spoke to Fujiki Kazue. She looked up fearfully, but her expression instantly turned to one of disappointment.

Even seen in the most favorable light, the middle-aged man could not be classified as handsome. Neither did he appear to have enough of a fortune to make someone happy. He didn't seem to have sufficient charm to overcome the shortcoming of being a chronic complainer. She must have realized this as soon as she saw him.

I was thinking that the man might also feel disappointed in her, but I was wrong. He raised his voice and said, "Now I get it," but he didn't seem disillusioned.

He spoke to her and tried to get her to go with him further down the street. She hesitated for quite a while, but in the end started walking with him.

I began to give up hope that this meeting would lead to happiness.

I have witnessed many occasions when a naive woman is led into a different life by a cunning man. There were women who became sick from the tough work of the sex industry and there were some who went deep into debt and lost everything. I'm not interested in people's tragedies. I don't sympathize with them or feel sorry for them. But I could imagine that Fujiki Kazue was being dragged down that path.

This being so, there was no need for me to follow her any longer, but I did not turn back. I had not yet given her my goodbye.

They entered a side street. About twenty meters away I could see that the man was forcibly pulling her along.

He was pulling her by hand into a karaoke shop. A gaudy sign reading "Karaoke" was affixed to the building.

I don't like karaoke, despite the fact that I love to listen to music. I have gone into karaoke shops several times as part of my job, but they were so disagreeable that I wanted to rush out of

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them. I don't know why. But it seems that there is a deep, unbridgeable divide between music and karaoke. It wasn't a matter of which was better, it was that I could only enjoy one side of the divide and felt it was better not to get near the other.

I could guess why the man wanted to take her into the karaoke shop.

Such shops were set up with private rooms, and singing together often meant letting the other person hear one's carnal nature. This made it ideal for removing the distance between two people. It could be that he intended to seduce her as soon as they entered the room, or he may just want to release his stress by singing. In either case it was nothing out of the ordinary.

She appeared to be firmly resisting. She was pulling back, nearly squatting down on the sidewalk, and was about to drop her umbrella.

It was not my place to get involved in whatever was to follow. It was not within the scope of my work to resolve problems between men and women. I decided to try another time. I turned away and shifted my umbrella to the other hand. At that instant, a voice flew toward me.

"Mr. Chiba! Help me, please!"

The voice was loud with a definite intonation. Fujiki Kazue was calling out the name just as a trumpet sounds out a note.

It took me awhile to register that it was my name she was calling.

8.

I tried to look as if I had just happened to come by. "What's the matter?" I said as I went to her.

The man standing next to her was clearly suspicious. He looked me over from head to toe and glared at me.

She stood up and tried to grab my arm, saying, "Mr. Chiba, please help me."

"What's the matter?" I asked again. It was difficult to ask convincingly when I already knew the circumstances.

"This person is the one I told you about," she said haltingly.

"The man on the telephone?"

"Yes."

"Who are you?" the man demanded. He seemed more decent close up than when I'd seen him from a distance. But he still didn't have the social skills of a polite company employee. His piercing gaze made me feel uncomfortable. He seemed unconcerned that the shoulder of his black jacket was getting wet in the rain.

"I'm just an acquaintance." When I said this, Fujiki Kazue's face turned sad and she looked away. "And you?" I asked in return.

"I have some business with her." His reply was mumbled, and he seemed not to want to explain the circumstances truthfully.

At that moment Fujiki Kazue began to run. She'd been standing

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like a wilted plant and had given no indication that she might move, and yet she suddenly tore away.

"Hey!" It was the man who raised his voice, not I.

Her coordination was awkward, but she ran with desperation, her arms flailing, her head down, and her handbag nearly dropping off her shoulder.

"Mr. Chiba, goodbye!" I could hear her shout from far away. Her clear, loud voice echoed throughout the arcade.

"What the hell do you mean, interfering?" the man accosted me. No doubt he was more upset than he himself realized, and he leaned forward, ready to charge.

At that instant, he lost his balance and fell toward me, and I felt afraid. Before I knew, I had rolled onto the ground with him on top of me. My rear end landed on a manhole cover filled with rain. The water seeped into my chinos and felt cold. I was dismayed to realize that I had touched him with bare hands.

I was disgusted that humans seemed so adept at creating problems for themselves. Then, when I took another look at the man's profile, I noticed something.

9.

The man came to, sat up and looked around him. Then he stood up, shamefaced, and slowly walked away.

I hid myself behind a vending machine and decided to follow him. Somehow, all I seemed to do on this job was tail people, as if I were a detective. This time, however, I was shadowing the man for personal reasons.

I knew this man. Well, no, if I said that, it might lead to a misunderstanding that I was acquainted with him. To be precise, I'd seen this man's photograph. Where? In a music magazine I'd recently read. He was the "genius" producer my colleague had told me about.

He walked unsteadily toward the side street, rubbing his backside. He took out his cell phone.

That was the perfect chance for me. I listened intently. We are able to hear voices on wireless frequencies even at some distance. Although it takes effort to single out the correct frequency from the numerous frequencies in use, it is not an impossible task. It is relatively easy as long as we know the location and time coordinates of the transmission source.

With his phone pressed against his ear, he scurried into a mixed-tenant building and entered the stairwell.

My ears caught the call signal.

"Yes," a woman's voice answered.

"It's me," I heard him say brusquely.

I couldn't tell if he didn't give his name because they were on intimate terms or because his number was known to the other party, and he could leave his name out.

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"How was it?" She didn't sound annoyed, but neither did her voice emit any charm.

"Could you wait a little longer?"

"Things didn't go well? I really can't wait."

"Don't say that. I'm sure she's the real thing. I just heard it. That voice is for real." The man's voice was full of the same passion that came through in the magazine. "But I wasn't able to explain to her."

"Is there such a thing as a real voice?"

"Sure. Singing is a talent based on an appealing voice."

"No matter how nice her voice is, she could be tone-deaf."

"I tried to get her to sing karaoke, but she misunderstood my intentions."

"Are you sure it'll work?"

"Just trust my intuition."

"Why didn't you just explain to her? She'll only suspect you if you don't."

"Whenever anyone finds out that I'm a music producer and want to scout them, they end up with high expectations and become so nervous, their voice changes."

"Aren't you expecting too much from her?" The woman seemed to be an old colleague in the same field.

"She has such a great voice."

"Have you heard of Kathleen Ferrier?" she asked.

"Who is that?" he asked out loud.

Who is that? I echoed in my head.

"She's an opera singer. She was a telephone operator who was discovered by someone on a telephone call and ended up becoming a great opera star. That may only be a story that was made up after the fact. But you're doing the same thing, aren't you? You became infatuated with the voice of a girl in the complaints department who happened to take your call."

"That's right."

"Isn't that absurd? Besides, you called her over and over with complaints, didn't you?"

"Yes, in order to confirm my impression. The more I listened to her voice the better it sounded."

"How about her looks?"

"Not that great," he replied instantly. Then he laughed. His laughter was relaxed and warm. "It's all right. That's often the case in people whose talents aren't being used. Once their talents are recognized, they become attractive on the outside, like dead skin peeling away. That's what happens."

"Oh, all right," she said in a voice that did not indicate whether or not she believed him. "I'll wait just three more days for you to contact me."

The call ended. The man returned his phone to his pocket. He

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moved forward dragging his leg. His spine, however, was straight, stretched taut in the stance of a person who knows where he is headed.

He turned into a narrow street. Coming out of the covered arcade, he opened his umbrella with a light push of a button.

I didn't follow him any further. I stood still, wanting to think about what was happening.

The producer had fallen for the voice of Fujiki Kazue, an employee in the complaints department of an electronics manufacturer. Fujiki Kazue had said he once demanded that she sing when he called with a complaint. Was that because he wanted to hear her singing voice? I thought it was a reckless way to go about his business. But I didn't think it was objectionable.

I looked up at the sky, struck by a thought.

What was going to happen to her? Did she really have a talent for singing?

No matter how much the producer liked her voice, that didn't necessarily mean that she could sing. Even if she did have talent, the odds were against her that she would become a successful singer. And I didn't know if she would be happy being a singer.

What was I to do? If I put "approve" on my report, Fujiki Kazue would disappear from this world tomorrow. There would be no mistake, although I didn't know what kind of accident was being prepared for her.

I'm not curious at all about how humans die. I am only involved with them because of my job. It doesn't affect me much how my targets die.

If, however, out of one chance in ten thousand, that producer's intuition was correct, and if out of one chance in ten thousand my target succeeded in becoming a fabulous singer . . . Or, if a time came that I happened to hear her singing when I was listening to music in a CD shop, that might be pleasantly amusing, I thought.

I noticed that the rain was falling harder, causing the raindrops hitting the ground to splatter loudly. They seemed to be pressing me to make a decision.

Recalling Fujiki Kazue's face, I made up my mind. I took a ten-yen coin out of my wallet. Without hesitating, I flipped the coin in the air. I caught it on the back of my hand. It was wet with rain.

Was it heads or tails? That was the way I would decide whether I would "approve" or "pass over." Would she die tomorrow or would she live out her fate? As it didn't make much difference to me which it was, I would let a coin toss decide.

I looked at the coin. It was heads, but I'd forgotten whether I was going to "approve" or "pass over" for heads. The rain fell even harder. Urged on by the rain, I decided I had thought about it long enough. "Pass over" should do it. ●

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PROVENANCE

by Robert Barnard

Leonid noticed the man when he was on his way to put a new label on a Manet picture on the third floor. The picture was due to be packed and taken away for exhibition in Lyons. The Hermitage, since the collapse of Communism, was readier to lend its treasures for special events such as the Lyons Manet show: Sometimes they accepted loans in return, in lieu of payment, but mostly they insisted on payment, preferably in dollars. After all, they had more than enough pictures of their own.

The man Leonid noticed was dressed in a T-shirt and sneakers and was walking up the Grand Staircase, looking neither to left or right. The gilded curlicues decorating the walls, the gods on cloud nine on the ceiling, the sturdy grey pillars with thickly encrusted gilt at their feet went unregarded by him. Leonid had never seen, or never noticed, him before, but as he gained the second floor he showed no hesitation in setting off in the direction of the Large Hermitage. The Grand Staircase could rarely have had so summary a dismissal. The man acted as if he knew the palace too well to notice it, but Leonid felt sure he did not. He knew where he was going because he was well prepared. Leonid shook his head and went about his business.

A quarter of an hour later he descended from the French Impressionists and found himself among the Dutch paintings in the Large Hermitage. Perhaps curiosity about the man had something to do with his destination. Certainly he walked around without apparent goal until he spotted him in front of one of the Rembrandts which were the pride of the Hermitage collection, a

Shortly after this issue goes to press, Robert Barnard will be toasted at the Malice Domestic Convention in Arlington, Virginia, as its Lifetime Achievement Award winner. This honor follows his receipt in 2003 of the Crime Writers' Association of Britain's Cartier Diamond Dagger Award for Lifetime Achievement. With more than forty critically acclaimed mystery novels to his credit, it's no mystery why Mr. Barnard is one of our most celebrated writers.

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jewel even among the palace's three million items. Leonid stood back and watched. The man put his face close to the bilingual label under the picture, then moved on. It could have been a picture by a teenage art student for all he cared. The next picture he stopped at, by a lesser figure, was considered, evaluated, taken in. Then the man put his head down again close to the label. A second or two later he straightened, a satisfied expression on his face.

He took out a little notebook, then wrote something in it, checking what he wrote against the label under the picture.

When the man had moved out of sight, Leonid went over to the picture, though he knew the description by heart. It was "Spring Landscape" by Cuyp, and it had been acquired by the Hermitage from the Yusupov Collection in 1922.

Leonid was more than intrigued. He was professionally interested. When a Spanish touring group swarmed into the gallery, surrounding a harsh-voiced woman holding a little banner aloft, he joined them as they went to one of the great Rembrandts. Leonid's quarry had been standing in front of it, but now he moved smartly aside to one of the small pictures hung beside it. Leonid became part of the Spanish group and managed to get the place beside the man with the notebook. In that little book there was a list, ending with the landscape by Cuyp, but headed by two intriguing entries. Leonid saw:

Renoir: Portrait of Mme. Bercy. Acquired from the Spaskov Collection, 1921.

Picasso: Young Girl With Parasol. Acquired from the Berisov-Vernet Collection, 1924.

So he had already done the twenty or thirty rooms on the top floor devoted to the French Impressionists and the moderns. Why had they provided him with so few entries for his notebook?

A possible answer floated into Leonid's mind, and his heart sank.

He turned his attention to the Rembrandt now being described by the Spanish-speaking guide. It was a painting imprinted on his heart and brain down to the last casual brushstroke. He tried to estimate the guide's expertise by the number of words he recognised: Amsterdam, Franz Hals, Saskia, National Gallery. Leonid had no foreign language beyond a rather halting English. When the Spanish group moved on to the next preselected high spot the man he was interested in was gone. Leonid went down the central aisle of the Dutch galleries, looking in every alcove, but the man was nowhere to be seen.

Leonid was troubled. Life had been so easy in the later years of Communist rule, when he had first come to work at the Hermitage. Then he had had a clearly defined specialist area (preservation) in which he worked. He was not thanked if he let his

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interest stray to any other area, where he would only be trespassing on someone else's special preserve.

Now it was all so different. True, his salary was now once again (Putin be praised!) paid regularly, but so much more was now expected of him. He was *required* to have an interest in the whole spectrum of the gallery's possessions and activities—conservation, display, inter-gallery loans, the education programme, the shop and other commercial enterprises, PR. . . . It was all very bewildering. They even had staff meetings, which ranged over these and myriad other topics. It was possible to make an awful fool of oneself at these meetings, and though Leonid was not aware that he had done that, he did feel he had not shone. How could he shine? He was the product of a different age. How could he talk confidently about the commercial exploitability of a Cuyp landscape or Gaugin's South Sea Island girls?

On his way back to his office on the ground floor he struck lucky. He was just passing the main cafeteria when he heard an American voice and, turning, he saw the object of his interest. He was standing at the coffee counter expostulating with the woman behind it.

"Chocolate! CHOCOLATE! I always have chocolate with a cappuccino."

The woman, one of Leonid's own generation, shrugged. Then, an idea striking her, she grabbed a small bar of chocolate from the display case, slapped it down on the counter, and held out her hand for the money.

Leonid slipped ahead of the tourists, nodded to the woman, and was given his usual minute but powerful coffee.

"You mind if I sit here?" he asked his prey, sitting alone at a table, his red T-shirt, Leonid now saw, bearing the legend KANSAS—WHAT A STATE WE'RE IN! The slogan puzzled Leonid. It seemed to have two meanings. Was it a Western-style joke? The man grunted at him and looked disgustedly at his cup.

"Freakin' natives," he muttered. "Wouldn't know a cappuccino from a milkshake."

"We like our coffee very strong, and just a little," said Leonid apologetically. The man seemed surprised to encounter a Russian in Russia. Then an idea seemed to strike him.

"Waterworks problem?" he asked.

"No. Is just how we like it," said Leonid. The man grunted again. Leonid looked around the cafeteria.

"It's getting crowded already," he said in English. "With the tourist season starting. I don't mean to offend. We in St. Petersburg are very glad to see you."

The man's face twisted into something that was a sort of amusement.

"I'm no tourist. I'm here on business."

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"Oh really? Something in the art world?"

"No way. All that crap just passes me by. I'm a lawyer."

Leonid's heart sank.

"Oh really? I noticed you as I passed through the Rembrandt Gallery. You're very thorough. That must be legal training."

"I like to double-check everything. That's not easy when half the labels on the pictures are in Russian."

"That's for the Russian visitors."

"Well, it doesn't help. How can I be sure that the English is a true translation?"

"The Russian is likely to be more accurate. It is a very subtle and precise language." With a faint idea of directing the visitor to other attractions he went on: "We have a church in St. Petersburg dedicated to St. Cyril, who gave us the Cyrillic alphabet."

"You should have thrown it back in his face," said the man, biting into an iced bun. "You're loaded down with a language no one but Balkan people can understand. I don't get it at all. Some of the letters are the same as ours. Some of them seem the same but turn out to be something different. Some of them are printed backwards. And some of them are way off the beaten track, never known as letters elsewhere. St. Cyril did you no favours."

"Are you a linguist, then?"

"A linguist? What's he when he's at home? I told you, I'm a lawyer."

"I thought in your spare time."

"I don't have spare time. I'm interested in the background of this collection, where the things came from, who owned them before."

Leonid began to sweat.

"Why should you be interested in that?"

"Well, after 'Where did it come from?' I ask myself *'Should* it have come from there?' Was it legally acquired, and legally lodged in the museum that holds it? Or was it a five-dime government seizing what it had no right to?"

Leonid said in a flat voice: "So you are interested in provenance?"

"Providence? No way. Never give it a thought. I'm interested in seeing justice done. Financial justice."

"Provenance," said Leonid, his voice still emotionless. "The history of the piece, who has owned it in the past, how it has passed from one person to another. As one hears the history of a house or a palace."

"Right. Spot on. You're on the ball. One of the few people in this godforsaken country who is."

Fearing he was going to be the object of further attempts to spread international goodwill, Leonid downed his potent brew and—feeling rather daring—said, "Have a good day" and left the cafe.

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But though he had left behind the brash American, the man stayed with him for the rest of the morning. He was interested in provenance, even if he didn't understand the word. Interested in whence the Hermitage had acquired the pictures it displayed. Mostly that question was quite easily answered. They had been bought by Catherine the Great or her predecessors or successors on the Imperial throne. Or indeed by her Communist successors in the 'twenties, who had acquired many of the Impressionists or twentieth-century paintings in a straightforward manner, buying them in the international market.

Which was why there were few entries from that massive collection on the third floor. They had been disapproved of and hidden away in the decades of Soviet realism, but they had been bought in the early years of the Revolution, when experiment was respectable, and now they were hung in all their glory with their provenance neatly detailed on the label.

In fact, *all* the pictures had their provenances neatly detailed. Had that been a bad mistake? Because though the upper galleries had yielded meagre results for the American lawyer, he was getting much more food for thought from the Dutch rooms. The Russian aristocrats of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries had not been in the vanguard of artistic progress: They had not bought the French Impressionists or Picasso—by and large they had probably thought them artistic frauds and impostors. Some Russians had collected them, though—specialists—and their pictures had been acquired, probably at knockdown prices, in the normal way.

The aristocrats, though, had preferred Dutch landscapes, Flemish portraits, church scenes, domestic vignettes. Also Spanish street scenes, English ladies in silks, Italian classical episodes. When the Yank (Leonid had lots of other words for Americans, and political correctness was a concept quite unknown in the new Russia) had finished with the Low Countries, fertile fields still lay ahead of him.

What had the foreign gangster said?

"A five-dime government seizing what it had no right to."

And what he had been looking for, Leonid felt quite certain, was pictures acquired during the 'twenties from the estates of aristocrats—probably all in exile. People whose descendants were still around, most often in the U.S.A., and anxious to reclaim what they still regarded as theirs.

Leonid was a product of the Age of Brezhnev, whose first name had been given him. He was not sorry that Communism had collapsed, but he was quite pleased it had existed. Many good things had happened in those seventy years, he felt: some because of the system, some by circumventing or questioning the system. Since its fall, Leonid had noted all over Eastern Europe the old families coming back, claiming their ancestral homes and acres, their royal

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status. The King of Bulgaria had been given back his palaces, and then had magnanimously given one of them back to the Bulgarian people. And then had graciously consented to become their Prime Minister. It was a better world, the larger part of Leonid's brain told him. But there was still a tiny part of it that told him that the world—*his* world—had gone mad.

What the imperialist gangster was doing, Leonid was quite sure, was identifying pictures that had been confiscated from the old aristocratic families in the early years of Bolshevik rule, so that they could claim them back in a court of law or receive their value today. Millions and millions of dollars! Billions of roubles! The idea was fantastic, repulsive! These pictures belonged to the Russian people.

He began once again prowling around *his* art gallery. He had no doubt it was the greatest in the world. He looked at his favourites, and at many pictures he had hardly noticed before but now felt he loved, because they were threatened.

What was to be done? Change the labels, for a start. There was no reason why a gallery should trumpet how its treasures had been acquired. But his heart sank. Even in brave new Russia everything took time.

Decisions were made, then passed up the hierarchy before they could be acted upon. Relabelling the collection was no more than a cosmetic change, but it would take months. No, years.

"Not now, I'm busy," he said when, his office attained, his secretary had thrust letters, requisitions, permits to sign into his hands.

But she noticed before five minutes were out that "busy" meant that he was thinking. He sat, slumped forward, his head in his hands.

He had had no impression from their talk that this man was part of a team, or a larger enterprise. On the contrary, aside from his knowledge of the layout of the Hermitage, he seemed to have come poorly prepared. A familiarity with the Cyrillic alphabet would surely have been a sensible piece of preparation, and so would a broad conspectus as to how the collection had been amassed over the centuries. This man seemed to be learning on his feet, coming from a zero position.

A maverick, then. Getting together a file of pictures that could have been confiscated in the early days of the Revolution from the estates of prominent noblemen no longer resident in their native country. Possibly his preparation had been to discover which of the main important families who escaped had descendants living in the States—men and women who could be approached with a view to representing them in a lawsuit. Leonid had heard of the expression "ambulance chaser" for rapacious lawyers eager to profit from accidents. The only stretchers involved in this kind of profiteering

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were the ones on which the canvases were once prepared. This was a piece of speculative moneymaking of the most blatant kind, and it threatened the collections of all the most important galleries in Eastern Europe.

Time. That was what was needed. Time. Time to prepare for the threat. To prepare in minor ways, like labels which said nothing about the provenance of the paintings. But, more important, preparing government for the threat, perhaps so it could pass special legislation, retrospective legislation, legalising the state's takeover of the property of émigré nobles decades before, and giving it democratic respectability.

He thought of how he would make these suggestions at next week's staff meeting, and what a furore his revelations about the threat to the collection would make.

Time . . . A maverick speculator working on his own.

He got up from his desk and, brushing aside his secretary, again went back into the body of the museum.

So many people. Crowds milling to and fro, almost like a revolution in the making. A people's uprising, an assertion of ownership in the great artworks of all countries and centuries that had found their home in the Hermitage. He wandered around the ground floor—the shops, the cafeteria, the children's assembly area, the cloakrooms. A city in itself.

And there he was again.

Walking purposefully towards the cafe again, but five minutes away from it, potbelly thrust forward, the legend KANSAS—WHAT A STATE WE'RE IN blazoned across the chest of his red T-shirt. His eyes were staring from left to right. Looking for somebody? An accomplice?

No, looking for a lavatory. Suddenly he swerved aside and went into the Gentleman's just outside Room 99.

Leonid waited, loosening his belt—the only weapon he had. Then he went into the small convenience and bolted the door, as the cleaner always did when she was at work inside. Then he disappeared into one of the cubicles.

The Yank was into serious business. Eventually, after sounds that made Leonid feel quite queasy, paper was torn, a flush was pulled, a door unlocked, and The Threat was out into the main part of the lavatory and running water into the basin. Leonid went out.

"Hi! You're the guy I was talking to in the cafe, aren't you?"

"That's right."

"Hey, I got an idea after you left. You're one of the gang—guys, I mean, who run this place, aren't you?"

His hands were all soapy, and he put his head down towards the water—Leonid noticed for the first time how nasty he found the

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little moustache, reminiscent of the last great threat to the Hermitage collection in 1941—and washed his fat cheeks.

"Er—yes, I am."

"Seems to me we could be useful to each other. What I need is information, background, maybe classified stuff. I could pay well—in dollars, of course. Always in dollars."

He'd at least learnt *some*thing about the new Russia, Leonid thought.

"So what do you say? Mutually advantageous, that's what it would be. Is it a deal?"

He was tugging down the paper towel. Leonid slipped his belt from round his waist, quickly slipped it around the man's neck, and tightened it around his throat.

"No," he said. "No, I won't. No."

So much time it took! And so much strength. The capitalist pirate at least made a struggle of it, his face going first red and then purple, his eyes popping, his wet soapy hands flailing. At last, when Leonid's own face was red with the struggle, the man started to fail, the movements became feebler, and finally his body slumped down onto the tiled floor. For a minute or two Leonid held the belt tight around his neck, resisting the temptation to pull up his trousers, which were around his ankles. At last he straightened up, and secured them with his belt.

He looked around him. The Threat's cubicle, smelly and dirty, was the place to put him. He picked him up by his shoulders, dragged him in, and shut the door. He couldn't lock it, but he pushed the feet well inside. Then he went and looked at himself in the mirror. Quite presentable, really. Quite normal. He slipped back the bolt on the door and went out into the thronged, pulsating gallery.

He was too excited to go straight back to the office. He must go around the great artistic domain that he had saved. He walked with his head high, his heart throbbing with pride. He was on cloud nine with the gods on the Grand Staircase, and he knew it. Never had he been so prompt in decision, so effective in action. He felt like God himself, almost like the Museum Director.

So taken up was he with his new status as the man who saved the Hermitage that he did not notice in the Spanish Gallery the man with the off-white T-shirt with the barely legible slogan which read KERRY TO WIN. Or the man in the French seventeenth-century gallery in the green T-shirt with the slogan which read HANG NELSON MANDELA. Both were peering closely at the labels under the pictures, and both were clutching small notebooks and ballpoint pens. Both were purposeful, efficient, and smiling. ●

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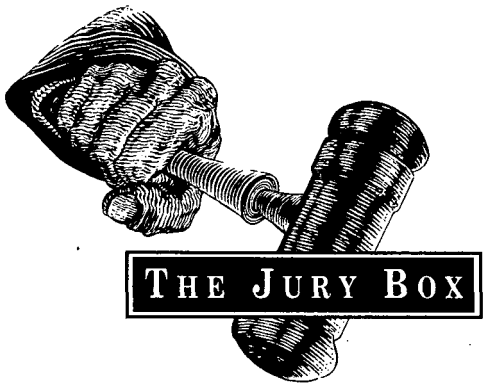

by Jon L. Breen

Our latest roundup of short-story collections finds plenty to recommend, from historic pulpsters to contemporary masters, beginning with two unusual detectives whose short cases may lead readers to seek the novels about them.

**** Terence Faherty: *The Confessions of Owen Keane,* Crippen & Landru, $42 signed hardcover, $17 trade paper. Ex-seminarian Keane, the rare fictional amateur sleuth who actually seeks cases, is as concerned with religion and ethics as crime. Four of these seven deeply felt and deftly written tales appeared in *EQMM,* including the powerful post-9-11 "A Sunday in Ordinary Time." Two are new, and the Christmas novella "The Headless Magi" appeared in an anthology.

**** Rob Kantner: *Trouble Is What I Do: Collected Ben Perkins Stories,* Point Blank/ Wildside, $19.95. Of these eighteen cases for Detroit's Perkins, carrying him from high school to middle age, a dozen first appeared in *AHMM* between 1982 and 2000 and one is new to print. Kantner is a master of his craft, somehow managing successfully to combine male private-eye series with extended-family saga.

**** Benjamin M. Schutz: *Mary, Mary, Shut the Door and Other Stories,* Five Star, $25.95. A dozen stories, one new and four from *EQMM,* combine social commentary, deft characterization, and nimble plotting. Some star cops and private eyes, including the titular Edgar-winner and two others about series shamus Leo Haggerty, but two of the best, both with chilling twists and one with Queenian puzzle-spinning, concern forensic psychologist Ransom Triplett.

*** Edward Marston: *Murder Ancient and Modern,* Crippen & Landru, $43 signed hardcover, $18 trade paper. Eighteen by the prolific Marston, combining a keen sense of irony and broad historical knowledge, include one from *EQMM,* two new. Several series sleuths from the author's novels (Ralph Delchard and Gervase Bret,

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Nicholas Bracewell, Christopher Redmayne) make single appearances, along with historical personages such as Jesus (offstage), Charlemagne, William the Conqueror, and Sir Francis Drake.

*** Perri O'Shaughnessy: *Sinister Shorts,* Delacorte, $21. Nineteen varied and well-executed tales, five from *EQMM* and eight new, range from the lawyer stories expected from the creators of Nina O'Reilly, who appears once, to pastiches of Dostoyevsky and Gertrude Stein.

*** Julian Symons: *The Detections of Francis Quarles,* edited by John Cooper, Crippen & Landru, $29 hardcover, $19 trade paper. Some of these forty cleverly clued puzzles in miniature were reprinted in *EQMM* and other digests, but most have not appeared since the 1950s in London's *Evening Standard.* An introduction by editor Cooper, an afterword by widow Kathleen Symons, and a full listing of private detective Quarles's cases are included.

*** Sherry Decker: *Hook House and Other Horrors,* Silver Lake, $12.95. Eleven stories, three from *AHMM,* introduce a talented writer with special strengths in atmosphere and description. All are supernatural, most criminous, including the chilling ghost story of the title.

*** Johnston McCulley: *Tales of Thubway Tham,* Wildside, $15. The author best known for Zorro created another great character, a lisping New York subway pickpocket who personifies honor among thieves, appearing (per editor John Gregory Betancourt's introduction) in "more than 180 stories between 1916 and 1948." (Other McCulley volumes available: *The Spider Strain and Other Tales from the Pulps* [Wildside, $15.95]; *The Crimson Clown* [originally published in 1927; Ramble House, $18]; and *The Crimson Clown Again* [1928; Ramble House, $18].)

*** Christopher B. Booth: *The Adventures of Mr. Clackworthy,* Wildside, $35 hardcover, $15 trade paper. Robin-Hoodish big-business con man Clackworthy, a contemporary of Thubway Tham, made a guest appearance in the volume above. These eight highly enjoyable escapades, introduced by mystery historian Steve Lewis, appeared in *Detective Story Magazine* between 1920 and 1922.

*** Dorothy L. Sayers: *The Travelling Rug,* Mythopoeic Press, $10. A previously unpublished short story, in which housemaid detective Jane Eurydice Judkin investigates a poltergeist, is entertaining in itself and of special interest to fans and scholars of Lord Peter Wimsey's creator. Special features include Joe R. Christopher's valuable introduction and annotated list of Sayers's short stories, Janet Brennan Croft's explanatory notes, and a reproduction of the entire hand-written manuscript.

*** Fender Tucker, *The Totah Trilogy,* Ramble House, $14. The wild plotting style of Harry Stephen Keeler seems to have rubbed off on publisher Tucker in three ingenious and agree-

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ably written stories about Farmington, New Mexico, in the '50s. "Angelus of Doom," including a dying message, represents the Catholic schoolboy's ultimate revenge on demanding nuns.

** Michael Bracken: *Yesterday in Blood and Bone,* Wildside, $15. In twenty hardboiled stories, two new including a title novella with a good newspaper background, the prolific Bracken again proves a capable entertainer. Downsides are too much repetition—one effective if sparingly used shock finish turns up twice—and a tiresome sexiness-by-rote in depicting the female characters.

Mixed collections of interest include Richard A. Lupoff's *Terrors* (Elder Signs, $16.95), in which Sherlock Holmes confronts the worlds of H.P. Lovecraft and Aleister Crowley, two radio mystery men meet on a train, and the nostalgic autobiographical childhood tale "The Crimson Wizard" will leave few readers unmoved; Tom Tolnay's *Selling America* (Silk Label, $12.99), eighteen variations on a theme of consumerism, three from *EQMM,* combining social satire and nightmarish suspense; and Achmed Abdullah's *Fear and Other Stories from the Pulps* (Wildside, $19.95), with an introduction by Darrell Schweitzer, including the 1921 novelette "Framed at the Benefactors Club," a gem of lively writing and preposterous plotting.

Nicholas Olde's rare 1928 collection *The Incredible Adventures of Rowland Hern* (Ramble House, $18), introduced by J.F. Norris, is a collection of parodic puzzles for Golden Age enthusiasts with a sense of humor.

Three additions to Otto Penzler's series of sports-themed original anthologies—*Murder at the Foul Line* on basketball, *Murder at the Racetrack* on horse racing, and *Murder in the Rough* on golf (Mysterious, $24.95 each)—have the usual star-studded lineups producing work of professional sheen but variable quality. Lawrence Block leads off all three, twice about hired killer Keller, third (and best) with the droll golf tale "Welcome to the Real World." Jan Burke's racing novella "Zuppe Inglese" creates a trio of central characters (human) that stick in the mind. Parnell Hall's basketball mystery "Fear of Failure" has one of most unusual motives in crime fiction annals. See if you believe it.

Three 2005 Edgar nominees, good stories all, appeared in late-year anthologies: James W. Hall's "The Catch" and Barbara Seranella's "Misdirection" in *Greatest Hits* (Carroll & Graf, $26), edited by Robert J. Randisi; and Daniel Wallace's "Welcome to Monroe" in *A Kudzu Christmas* (River City, $24.95), edited by Jim Gilbert and Gail Waller. The Hall and Wallace stories read like mainstream "literary" fiction, while Seranella celebrates the joys of tricky plotting implied in her title.

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Investment in Vevey

by Olen Steinhauer

1.

"It's amazing when you think about it," said Louis.

Meredith fingered the sheet on her cot, while just outside their train window the Swiss Alps lumbered past, white peaks blurred by early morning clouds. She yawned. "How?"

"Two kids from Balaam, Texas. *Here.* Just look outside."

"I preferred Naples. Maybe you should've walked faster."

"Mare, I told you. That was about security, both of us getting out safe. Just dumb luck the battery died."

Meredith rubbed her nose and considered that, because, despite everything, her husband had a good head on his shoulders. And in seven years she'd never known him to be a liar.

They had been on trains since the previous evening, fleeing from the Campi Flegrei station in Naples and changing once in Rome's Termini Station—a name that struck her as rather ominous. "Like terminus," she'd said when they boarded. "That movie about the Holocaust. *Hotel Terminus.*"

"Let's try to be a little more upbeat," he told her.

For the past eleven hours in this cramped sleeping cabin, Meredith had been unable to sleep—partly because of nerves, partly because of Louis's incessant snoring. Once she even thought she heard Texas accents out in the hall, but couldn't make out anything because of the steady rev of Louis's nasal cavity. It was unbelievable he hadn't woken himself up.

"You don't know anything else about this town?"

He pulled the Europe guidebook out of his backpack. "Just liked the sound of it." He flipped through the pages, then held it out to her. "Here it is. Vevey."

Author of *The Bridge of Sighs*, a Best First Novel nominee at the 2004 Edgar Awards, and of the subsequent novels *The Confession* and *36 Yalta Boulevard* (all from St. Martin's Minotaur), Olen Steinhauer is an American who has made his home in Europe for the past several years. If you like this story, Mr. Steinhauer's debut for *EQMM*, you won't want to miss his upcoming novel *Liberation Movement* (July '06). ❡

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She read about a small town on Lake Geneva that had hosted a variety of famous personalities throughout the years—Henry James, Charles Chaplin, Patricia Highsmith, Graham Greene—and read that it was extremely clean, like much of Switzerland, and was the headquarters of the Nestlé company.

"Chocolate," said Meredith.

Louis nodded at the window, and she saw Lake Geneva for the first time, ringed by mountains. In the morning light the water was blue, but dark blue, as if chocolate lay just beneath the surface.

"And you think we'll be safe now."

Louis rubbed her neck. "They don't know our names. I told you, we're invisible."

The guidebook Louis had read and reread during the first leg of their exodus from Italy was right. Vevey was clean to a fault. Just outside the station's arched entrance, he saw that even the face of the clock high above the door had been dusted to perfection. Meredith followed with her own small bag, staring at the open guidebook.

"Look up," he said as a tourist in a baseball cap passed between them.

"What?"

"Here."

When she took her face out of the book he opened an arm to gesture up an elegant canal that led to the sun-dappled expanse of Lake Geneva. "So did I get it wrong?" he asked.

Meredith let the book drop to her side. "Oh geez, Louis."

This was what he had wanted. A place beautiful enough to distract her from that moment, yesterday, when he'd decided to abandon her.

The mood carried them deeper into the old town, to the rue du Conseil and the Hôtel des Négociants. The desk clerk, an efficient *Suisse* with rectangular glasses and very good English, gave them keys to a room on the top floor, smiled, then looked past them to where an elderly couple entered the lobby—a thin, scrawny woman and a fat man wearing a cowboy hat. A trace of disgust flickered across the clerk's face.

"Jesus, Fanny, this place's small," the old man said. His Texas accent was very thick. "Not like the pictures on the Internet."

Louis bobbed his eyebrows at Meredith, who grinned.

Their room was minimal, with a small black television and walls that, halfway up, tilted diagonal to accommodate the shape of the roof. Meredith threw herself onto the bed.

"I'm going to sleep all day."

"Didn't you sleep on the train?"

She twisted from the pillow to give him one of those looks he'd

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become accustomed to.

"I'll look around for opportunities," he said.

"Can't we take a week off?" Her voice was muted because she was speaking into the pillow.

"Sometimes I think you don't hear a word I say, Mare. I don't know *what* these guys can do. We let the money sit awhile in case they can trace a withdrawal. Right now, let's consider ourselves broke."

"Yeah," she said to the pillow. "Okay."

With his hands deep in his pockets, Louis left the hotel and walked through the garden of the Place du Marché, where he stopped beside a bronze statue of Charlie Chaplin in his tramp disguise staring out at the broad lake. A ferryboat passed. In the foreground, people milled with baby carriages and settled in the grass to eat bagged lunches. Now that the morning haze had burned off, the city was warm, its high altitude keeping its streets close to the sun, and American tourists took advantage of this by wearing audacious, brightly colored shorts.

Louis strolled through the crowd, watching hips. A lot of people wore fanny-packs across their stomachs, which made lifting money without accomplices difficult. He could rouse Meredith from bed, but she wasn't up for much right now. And besides, he still wasn't entirely sure he could trust her. So he sat on a low wall along the shore to consider his options.

"Fanny?"

Again, that accent made him smile, and he watched as the fat Texan he'd seen in their hotel stopped in front of him to admire the distant mountaintops. The man's flat rear end was directly in front of Louis's face, one side swollen by a ragged leather wallet just visible above the back pocket of his knee-length shorts.

"Fanny?" the man repeated, his hand held like an awning over his eyes; he'd left his cowboy hat in the hotel. "Fanny, would you take a look at that?"

Louis closed his eyes, making out the strains of the accent—Dallas area, or maybe the Panhandle. He snorted. This was just too easy.

He waited, though, as the scrawny old woman with baked yellow hair and a long cigarette between her arthritic knuckles walked up to the fat man. "Oh, my dear, it's just precious," she said.

Louis approached the man's other side. "Don't see nothing like that back home."

The fat man twitched, then uncovered his eyes and peered at Louis with something like shock. Louis gave him a big smile. The man said, "You a Texan, boy?"

"Yessir. Since the day I was born."

"Well, how about *that,*" said Fanny, touching her bony chest.

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Meredith woke suddenly, as if someone else were in the room. But she was alone. The low sun through the windows reflected off the black glass of the tiny television, and the clock told her it was four in the afternoon—in military time, 16:00, like all Europeans seemed to prefer. Then she reached for the cell phone she'd taken from Louis's bag as soon as he had left, and checked its tiny screen. Its battery was still half full.

To settle her nerves, and take her mind off that damned battery, she squatted at the window and peered down the length of the rue du Conseil, where currents of tourist heads were bottlenecked by pink and yellow buildings. After Balaam, and then Lubbock, where everything ended up sand-colored or white, she could appreciate the Europeans' sense of color. The colors had been more intense in Naples, but perhaps that was only because the sun was more intense, frying the colors a deeper hue.

Though Louis was still able to maintain his optimism, she had no idea what they'd do in Switzerland. They'd arrived in Italy five months ago after a long period of preparation, because that was what was necessary if you wanted to separate people from their money. Quiet, rational planning.

There'd been nothing original about their scheme; people were doing it all the time. But those people were always caught. Louis's brilliance had been his focus on eluding capture. So they looked at their notes and playacted, as if they were the FBI, poking holes in the security of the plan, and then quickly covered those holes and tried again until it was airtight.

It started with a Web site. Louis had done some designing for a couple of Lubbock businesses, and he understood the aesthetics of the professional look. CruiseTheMediterranean.com featured broad, panoramic photos of the Italian coast that made it look like something out of a Hitchcock film. When Meredith got home from her late shifts dancing at the Bunny Ranch and Run, they'd drink Shiner Bock and work the language by examining obviously fraudulent sites, getting rid of phrases like *We would like to offer you* and *limited-time offer,* phrases that reeked of false camaraderie or sales pressure. They invented an elaborate company history, and faked associations with legitimate international tourist organizations. Photographs of gentle-looking, long-dead folks were tracked down and used to present Drew and Elizabeth Tennenbaum, "avid travelers and travel agents who have been caring for customers since 1982." No letters of appreciation, because in the real world no one believed such things.

The e-mail address was a given, but to assure customers they listed an address in New Haven, Connecticut. The phone number would come later. Once the site was ready, they burned it onto a CD, sold their house, and flew to Paris, then took a train to Milan,

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where they bought a pay-as-you-use telephone from a kind old man who didn't mind using Louis's fake Texas driver's license to set up his account under the name Drew Tennenbaum.

Meredith went on to Naples to find an apartment, while Louis took the train up to Austria. In Vienna, he found a credit card by hanging around the nightclubs, particularly N-Box, where rich young Austrians and Americans on coke remained blissfully unaware as he borrowed their cards for a quick trip to the bathroom, where, in a stall, he scribbled down all the applicable information. "These are the kinds of kids who never look at their monthly bills," he told her.

Armed with two credit cards, he went to an Internet cafe and, as Drew Tennenbaum, set up an account for a telephone-forwarding service that gave them a Connecticut number and automatically bounced it to the new Italian mobile. Then he set up an account with a Ukrainian Internet server to host their site, which he uploaded from the CD, adding the new phone number. Within a half-hour, everything was arranged.

He joined Meredith in Naples, where, in addition to finding a charming (a.k.a. tiny) apartment in the old town, she had set up, through her own day trips to Internet cafes in Rome, an anonymous offshore Jersey account through HSBC with their minimum $10,000 deposit. Then they sat on their small terrace, listening to squealing Italian babies and sucking on bottles of Birra Moretti, and waited for the phone to ring.

"So what brings you to Switzerland, Travis?"

The fat Texan took a sip of his Fleur d'Abeilles, and looked as if he was going to spit it out. "Jesus, this ain't beer!" He waved at the Café Vertigo's waiter, who came over with a smile, brushing his white apron. "The *hell* is this?"

"Travis," said Fanny.

"It's a 'honey beer,' sir," said the waiter, unperturbed. "From the Egger region."

"Well, Jesus, son. Haven't you got any just plain beer? Heineken? Bud?"

The waiter considered that. "Dark, or light?"

"I want *beer,"* said Travis.

Louis leaned forward. "You have Löwenbräu?"

The waiter nodded and walked away.

Fanny shifted the purse she'd placed on their small outdoor table, glancing up the rue du Torrent. "I don't know why you have to be this way, Travis. You're not in Dallas anymore."

Travis grunted.

"So?" asked Louis.

"Eh?"

"So what brings you to Switzerland?"

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"Oh," said Travis. "Fanny's idea. She's never been to Europe. Wanted to see all of it before we kick the bucket. Three months planned; flew in today."

"You're starting here?"

Fanny placed a shriveled hand on Louis's and explained: "Well, you *see,* my people come from Vevey. Right from here. Great-grandpa Gustav, he was a young butcher in town, and he fell in love with Aimee Mastard, a very rich French woman who came through on her family's summer holidays. Well, they got married and moved to France."

"Old Gustav was no fool," muttered Travis.

"Don't listen to him," said Fanny. "Travis don't believe in love. He thinks it's all about money." She ruffled his white hair, which he took obligingly. Then she gripped a clump and his eyes widened. "Except when it comes to me. Right, Travis?"

"Yes'm."

Despite their obvious affluence, Travis and Fanny Mackey reminded Louis of his own people, back in Balaam. He loved living in Europe, but sometimes he missed the way, back home, the rich carried no airs, and joked and drank just like their poor neighbors.

Fanny released her husband and lit a slender Eve cigarette as the waiter returned with a glass and a bottle of Löwenbräu lager. He poured it so that a thin layer of foam floated on top, and waited for Travis to taste it. Travis sipped and raised the glass as if toasting the waiter. "This'll do."

"So you've also got French blood," Louis said to Fanny.

She exhaled smoke. "We're none of us perfect. When the Great War came along, it ruined the family. Financially, that is. But they stayed together—not like people these days. And in the 'twenties they came over on the boat and made their way to Texas. Started with ranching, then made their way into oil." She shrugged again. "Lamarr Oil—you heard of us?"

"Don't know oil," said Louis.

"Good for you," said Travis. "There's money in it if you can find it, but it'll cripple you." He tapped his chest. "Six ulcers and a heart bypass."

"That's because you eat too much, dear."

"You Swiss, too?" asked Louis.

Travis shook his head. "Family came over from Italy." He leaned forward, raising his brows. *"Ee-tail-ee-ah-no."*

"Ah." Louis considered bringing up their connection, but decided against it.

"That was a long time ago. Beginning of last century. Can't even speak the language." Travis paused. "But what about you? What's a fine young Texan doing in this godforsaken corner of the world?"

Louis hesitated, but only briefly. In the train, he'd thought this through. His introduction. At first he'd decided to flirt with the

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truth. He and his wife were travel agents in Italy, and were relocating in order to live in the mountains. But while that was probably safe enough, it wasn't a *functional* cover. It wouldn't, as Meredith liked to say, separate people from their money. So he leaned close and lowered his voice.

"Can you keep a secret?"

Fanny looked at Travis with a trace of worry, but Travis was a man used to secrets. "I'd tell you how many I'm already keeping in here," he said, tapping his skull, "but then I'd have to kill you."

"Well, it's not *such* a secret," said Louis. "I just don't want anyone taking the idea before we've had a chance to get it off the ground."

"We?" asked Travis.

"Me and my wife."

"Oh?" asked Fanny. "She's not with you?"

Louis tilted his head toward the square behind him. "She's back in the hotel, sleeping off a hard day's prospecting."

Travis rapped his fingertips on the table. "Prospecting? *Now* you've got my attention."

Louis thought that might do it. "Tex-Mex," he said. "There it is in a nutshell. Tex-Mex cuisine in a country that doesn't know the meaning of real spice."

Travis leaned back, considering the angles. Fanny patted her knees. "Well, I think that's just a fan*tas*tic idea! These people need a little variety, don't you think, Travis?"

"But how you gonna do this?" he asked. "If these Swiss folk can't take a little burn, then you'll be closed before you even open. Where's your market?"

"Look at yourselves," said Louis. "This town takes an average of forty American tourists every day of the season; half of them stay at least three days. First night, they go local and get bored. There's no flavor to this food. Second day, they see a sign, or an ad, for real Tex-Mex, and their mouths water. Not to mention the other towns along Lake Geneva, and Geneva itself. There are twenty-four *thousand* Americans living there, and seven thousand more in Lausanne—that's only a twenty-minute drive away."

"Competition?" asked Travis.

"Zilch."

Travis nodded as he drank his beer, the calculations working behind his thick skull; Fanny sucked on her Eve. Louis had no idea how many American tourists came through this region, nor how many lived in Geneva. But verifiable facts were beside the point.

"You're talking my language, Louis," said Travis. "Forty-odd years in the oil business, you learn a thing or two. You learn *people.* And the most important thing is you've got to let people think *they're* making the decisions. Sounds like that's how you're run-

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ning this."

"Yessir," said Louis, because that was exactly how he was running this.

Travis settled his glass on the table. "Looking for investors?"

Louis shook his head and raised a hand. "Now, Travis, that's not why I'm telling you about this. I'm not trying to make business with you—you're on vacation."

"Just answer the question."

It took a few minutes for the hot water to reach their floor, but as soon as the hand-held shower began to change temperature Meredith stepped into the bath and soaped herself. Five months in Italy taught you to take advantage of warm water as soon as it appeared; another minute, and it might be gone forever.

Switzerland didn't strike her as a bad place, and it was certainly beautiful, but this was not the country she had dreamed of when she was a girl, living in her mother's house in Balaam, where she stretched on a cheap lawn chair in a weed-choked yard, and every fifth building, it seemed, was another Baptist church. She'd dreamed of Italy.

And for five months she'd had it. After an initial week's silence at the beginning of March, their cell phone began to ring, and she spoke with a practiced professional tone to elderly people from all around the United States. If they sounded unsure, she let an ounce of her accent come through, because that gave them a measure of comfort. Certainly no one with such a pretty Southern accent would cheat them. So she talked them through the details of the cruise, the specifics of the boat—its length and capacity and on-board entertainment options. She gave them price structures based on their budget, then helped them through methods of payment. While most were armed with credit cards, others preferred checks and money orders, which she acquiesced to, giving them the New Haven address, which the U.S. Postal Service knew to forward to a *post restante* desk in central Rome.

Despite all their planning and work, she was shocked by the ease with which people handed over their money. It was unfathomable. Occasionally, she'd speak to a nervous man or woman who had read about scams and frauds on the Internet, and who demanded to know all the tiniest details about their business. But these, too, had been prepared, and she rattled off company details as if from memory, reading from the papers that Louis, in his infinite forethought, had prepared.

As with any business, there were cancellations requiring refunds, and Meredith obliged. But these were few and far between. She even made hotel reservations at the Westin Excelsior on the Via Veneto in Rome—thirty-nine rooms for all sixty-two customers—for July 6, the day before the boat was to embark.

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"Get them over here," Louis explained. "Let them get a taste of Italy. It'll disorient them, and slow them down."

The timeframe was perfect. Since the customers would arrive on July 6, after May 6, two months beforehand, they apologetically told all callers that the boat was full. Two months was the limit for disputing credit-card purchases in the United States.

With prices for the three-week cruise ranging from $4000 for an interior room to $7000 for a suite, they brought in $341,000. Take from that the airfare for all sixty-two, bought with cash from a Rome travel agent, and the total sank to $291,400, but allayed all suspicion until the retirees arrived in Rome to find that, while they had hotel reservations, the rooms had not been paid for. Only the next morning, when they grouped in the lobby, wearing white and clutching sun visors, would they learn there was no one to meet them.

"But I *want* to go," Louis said on the morning of July 6. "A drink at the hotel bar. Just to see their faces."

She ordered him not to, because that was not part of the plan. And he, in the end, agreed before boarding the train for Austria, where, in yet another Viennese Internet cafe, he cancelled his call-forwarding service and deleted the Web site from the Ukrainian server. Meredith took apart their Milan cell phone and dropped the pieces into separate dumpsters around Naples. All traces had been erased.

She dried off with something not much larger than a hand towel, examining her breasts and belly in the mirror. Five months of fresh pasta had altered the body cowboys at the Bunny Ranch once paid to watch dance, but she'd gained the curves Italian women carried so well.

She snorted; she was thinking anything to distract her from that telephone.

She brought her hair dryer to the bedroom and turned on the television with a remote. Transvestites on a German talk show rose menacingly from their chairs and shouted at one another as she dried her hair.

They'd moved into a larger place just south of Naples, and spent their days eating rich Roma tomatoes, Parmesan cheese, olive oil, and crusty bread, drinking cheap-but-fantastic local wine, and mapping out the next con on their new terrace with a view of the Mediterranean. They were both full of themselves, but for good reason. In the space of a year—counting the months of planning back in Texas—they'd earned what her exotic dancing would've netted in six years. And they'd done it with style, ending up on one of the most impressive stretches of coastline in the world. She'd even begun learning some Italian to smooth her visits to the vegetable market, while Louis focused on the future. "My genius," she'd call him, then lift a bare leg over his shoulder as he sat at the

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kitchen table with his notes. He was always willing to be distracted.

Then, yesterday—July 28th—their apartment telephone rang.

She answered it with a bubbly *"Pronto?"*

"Signora Tennenbaum?" A man's heavy Italian accent.

"Sí," she said before realizing she should've said *no.* That was the name they'd used for the cruise business and had since discarded.

"Signora Tennenbaum, we have something to discuss."

"Who is this?"

"Me, I am no one. I am a representative."

"Whose representative?"

Louis was getting up from the table, staring at her, concerned.

"It does not matter," said the voice. "But there is a problem. The man I represent is rather upset that there are sixty elderly Americans in Rome right now. Very unhappy, these people are. It is not good for the city, you understand. Rome runs in part on trade, in part on tourism. It is a lovely city."

Meredith was unable to answer because her tongue had swollen to twice the size of her mouth.

"The man I represent, he protects the interests of many businesses in Rome. They depend on him. And these poor elderly Americans, they complain. It hurts business for everyone."

"I—" said Meredith. "I don't know what you're talking about." She twisted the phone so that Louis, breathing hard, could hear as well.

"There's no need to be unreasonable," the man said. "This happens sometimes. When you come to Italy to do business, you must take into account the local culture. Italy is famous for its culture. Also for its generosity."

"Generosity?" Louis said without thinking.

"Signor Tennenbaum, so happy you are here as well. In fact, I was hoping to meet you soon. To discuss arrangements."

"Arrangements?" he said, stuck in the rhythm of single-word questions.

"Everything should be smoothed over," said the man. "I'm sure you agree."

"Yes," said Louis.

"Please meet me at Piazza Bellini. Immediately."

"How'll I know you?" said Louis.

"I will know you, Signor Tennenbaum."

The transvestites on television were fighting now, ripping at one another's shirts, and the German audience was screaming at them, egging them on. Meredith turned it off and lay on the bed again.

After ten minutes of utter panic, they had gone to the multilayered Piazza Bellini, Meredith in sunglasses waiting on the other side of a fenced-in pit of excavated Roman stones, while Louis took an outside table by the opposite rail and ordered a

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Campari. She used the telephoto of a 35mm she'd bought the week before to examine the small, sweating man who approached him, shook his hand, and sat down. Louis was an actor by nature, and had even taken part in some productions at Balaam High. Just after they'd started dating she saw him in *The Mousetrap* and was swept away by his Giles Ralston; that's when she fell in love. He knew how to separate himself from his anxiety, be it stage fright or the fear of imminent death. But through the lens she saw him falter under the bright Italian sun, and the man, noting this, leaned forward and patted his hand, smiling. When the man left, Louis didn't even look around to find her. He just bolted.

Louis was shocked that, after all that had happened, he could feel this jubilant. He ignored the newly repaired elevator and skipped up the long flights of the Des Négociants, humming to himself. Then he recognized the melody—"The Yellow Rose of Texas." Unbelievable.

He found Meredith stretched on the bed, naked, looking wonderful. Yes. At a moment like this, he could forgive her anything. She craned her head sleepily. "Hey."

"Hey yourself." He climbed on top of her, burrowing his nose into her neck. "You're clean."

"You're not," she said, and pushed him off. He rolled on his back. "Why did you leave me at the Piazza Bellini?"

He sighed at the ceiling. "Do we have to go through this again? Security. Leave separately, and it's harder for them to track us. I tried to call you, but my battery was dead. I knew I'd get through to you later."

"Yeah," she said. "You told me."

"Now smile for me."

She wouldn't, not yet. "Why're you so chipper?"

"Our problems are solved."

"I doubt that."

"Oh yes," he said. "But I need to work all night before our noon meeting. I've got a business plan to concoct." He sat up and bobbed his eyebrows. "Tex-Mex restaurant. We've got investors."

"How could anyone believe a man who smells as bad as you?"

He got up and unbuttoned his shirt. "You wouldn't believe it. I'm just sitting there on a bench, thinking stupidly about picking pockets, and who should walk up but Fanny and Travis Mackey from Dallas!"

"Mackey? Did we know them back home?"

"We know them now. I buy them a couple of drinks, and old Travis is ready to write a check for twenty grand."

She raised herself on her elbows. "Twenty grand?"

"I show him a business plan, and he'll hand over a check. He thinks he's *forcing* me to take it."

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"God, Lou, you're quick." Then she smiled. "My *genius.*"

He crawled back onto the bed.

"But I only screw clean geniuses."

Louis gave her a smirk and jumped up again, tearing off his shoes and jeans, then his underwear. "Just a sec."

In the bathroom he turned on the water and quickly brushed his teeth with the toothbrush Meredith had propped in a hotel glass, then stepped into the bath. "Jesus, it's cold!"

"Patience," she called from the other room.

So he stood naked in the tub with the water pouring down the drain, humming to himself. This was what it was all about. The money was one thing, but money, over the length of your life, comes and goes. It was really about the pleasure of looking into the eyes of a stranger as he lapped up the quick inventions of your creativity. It was an art, this kind of work, not unlike the art of standing on a stage, convincing an audience that you really were Giles Ralston, and that your story was important to them.

He was a long way from the Piazza Bellini and that soft-spoken Mafiosi who demanded that, because of the damage they had caused, the Tennenbaums should hand over half of their earnings, "which we estimate at two hundred thousand United States dollars."

"That's ludicrous," he'd told the man. "We worked hard for it."

"And you will continue to work hard. That's the nature of life. Next time, we will only ask for a quarter."

"For what?"

The man shrugged. "You watch the movies, no? Protection."

They agreed to meet in two days at the restaurant Zi Teresa on the Borgo Marinaro harbor, where the Tennenbaums would purchase their protection. Then Louis rubbed his face and peered into the Italian's wet eyes. "How?"

"You take the money from your Jersey account," he said, blinking.

"No. How did you find us? We took care of everything."

The Italian seemed surprised. Then he shook his head, smiling. "She said nothing? I suppose I expected that. It's embarrassing."

"What's embarrassing?"

"A friend," he said. "He saw her in Rome. They knew each other from a place where Mrs. Tennenbaum once worked. The . . ." He snapped his fingers. "What was it?"

"Bunny Ranch and Run."

The Italian pointed at him. "Precisely. They were lovers, and—" He stopped. "Now, I'm sure this *relazione amorosa* was before you and the lady were married."

Louis nodded stiffly. They'd been together since high school in Balaam, they married as soon as they moved to Lubbock, long before she'd ever considered dancing for a living. "What's his name?"

"Alfonso Lorenzo. They must have been very close, because she told him everything. Rather quickly."

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The Italian got up to leave, and Louis sat for a moment, his face burning. This, he thought, was what happened when you trusted your life to a two-bit redneck stripper.

Then he got up and started walking swiftly to the Campi Flegrei station.

She caught up with him outside the station and demanded to know what was going on. "Battery," he told her. "Dead."

He'd said that lie to a face he no longer recognized, because she had now become another woman, one with secrets. She possessed a parallel life that worked against him.

But sleep helped. He woke as the train crossed into Switzerland at Brig, a town they couldn't see in the darkness, and realized he had judged her on the word of a mobster. A professional liar. After all, he didn't even *know* an Alfonso Lorenzo from the Bunny Ranch. And besides, he knew from his own experience—his real-life experience of many years—that she was a good woman, the kind of woman a man like him was lucky to have.

As he toweled off, the phone rang and he could hear Meredith's hesitant *Yes?* through the door. Then silence, with her saying *Okay* before hanging up.

"Who was that?" he called as he rubbed the towel into his hair.

"Front desk. Telling us what time's breakfast."

"When is it?"

"Eight o'clock."

"Well, I won't be up in time for that," he said. "I'll be working late. They do have Internet here, right? And no funny-shaped outlets?" He saw one beneath the mirror that reassured him.

"No," she said. "No funny outlets."

He went into the bedroom naked, where she sat on the edge of the bed, her bare back facing him. "You okay?"

She shrugged, then looked at him. Her eyes were red.

"You've been crying?"

She tried on a smile. "You don't feel it, do you?"

"What?"

"The pressure. Italian Mafia looking to kill us."

He came around and rubbed her shoulders. "I don't like it any more than you do. But I'm not going to let it stop us. Remember, we're invisible."

"We should've stayed and just paid them."

"If we'd stayed, I'd never have met our good friends Fanny and Travis. You'll like them. They're a little like my grandparents."

"Really?"

He moved his hand down from her shoulder to her breast. "Let's not talk about my grandparents now."

Meredith let him have everything he wanted, because this was the last time they'd ever have sex. She opened herself up, let him do

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things she normally shied from, and moved with abandon, as if she were not running the caller's words over and over again in her head.

"Well, *hello* there," said a woman's voice. Very Texan. "I guess you're Meredith, yes?"

"Yes."

"So glad to finally speak with you," Fanny Mackey said in a rush. "I just wanted to tell Louis that we bought his plane ticket to Dallas, and it's the noon flight like we discussed. I'm so *sorry* you won't be coming along, but we'll meet someday, I'm sure."

"Okay," said Meredith, suddenly very aware of her nakedness.

"Dear, I've gotta run. Travis is getting impatient to eat. *Men.* Love to you, dear."

Then Fanny hung up. Meredith sat on the bed and began to cry.

Afterward, Louis rolled onto his back, covered in sweat. "God. Wow."

She kissed him and got up to dress. "You hungry?"

"Yeah, but I've got to get to work."

"I'll pick up something."

"Pasta?"

"I'll see what I can find."

Before she left, she slung her purse over her shoulder and looked back at him sitting naked at the desk with the laptop open in front of him. She had to admit, he looked very handsome.

She wondered what, exactly, she was going to do. Before yesterday, she'd never expected this sort of thing from him. From other men, yes, but not Louis. Louis had been like the bronze Charlie Chaplin she found in a green square facing the lake. Something pure and solid. Now, he was someone entirely different, like those drooling cowboys back at the Bunny Ranch, who wanted nothing more than to spend a few minutes with her in bed before hightailing it out of town.

There was only one thing to do, but it took her awhile to face up to it. She continued past Chaplin to the chocolate lake and stared at the twinkling lights of other towns along the shore. There, among promenading couples, she was finally able to face what had to be done.

He was working so well. Online, he'd quickly tracked roundabout figures from wholesalers selling jalapeños, canned tomatoes, corn meal, ground pork, and beef. The simple fact that this stuff existed, just a couple of keystrokes away, still amazed him.

Then he heard a knock at the door.

He grabbed a hotel robe. "Yes?"

"Lou!" said Travis. "That faggot at the front desk said I'd find you here. You got a minute?"

"Just a sec!" Louis closed the lid on the computer and opened the door.

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The fat Texan was grinning as he came in. He smelled a little of sweat as he patted Louis's shoulder. "How's that business plan coming?"

"Oh, it's coming along fine."

"Great," said Travis. He closed the door behind himself and reached into his pocket. But instead of taking out a checkbook, he produced a small pistol. "Louis," he said, "you must think I'm one dumb shit."

Louis opened his mouth, then shut it.

"You sure made my shit list, Louis. Now sit down."

Louis settled on the bed, while Travis took the desk chair. He wouldn't stop grinning.

"You guys were all right," Travis said, leaning back in the chair and keeping his pistol on Louis. "Fanny found the Web site—she's *always* on the damn computer—and said to me, *Honey, let's go to the Mediterranean!* Next thing I know we're standing with a bunch of ol' retirees in the lobby of the Excelsior twiddling our thumbs, waiting for the two of you to show up. You should've been around to see it . . . you weren't, were you?"

Louis shook his head.

"Well, it was a damn sight. Old ladies crying, old men pretending like they didn't care. The police were brought in, and I could see right away these guys were a joke. Pretty uniforms, afraid to get them dirty. So I called my brother back in Austin. Genealogy nut, that one. But he had phone numbers for our distant relatives in Naples. Turns out one of our cousins had moved up to Rome. An accountant. But a bulldog, if you get my drift. He and I put our heads together. Smart one, that Enzo. Real smart."

"But . . . how?" Louis said, rubbing his face.

"Accountant like him, he's got friends," said Travis, sniffing. "Friends in *banks*. And a rich man like myself, you can bet I've got a lot of them, too. So we started making calls. Find out who knew of an American setting up some kind of offshore account between, say, January and May, and then filling it up with something in the neighborhood of four hundred grand in real money. Our money, I mean. I was just estimating, you understand, based on counting the heads of all those suckers standing around the Excelsior."

Louis began to stutter: "B-but, those accounts. They're supposed to be—"

"Confidential?" Travis smiled. "Anonymous? Son, we're talking about Italy, not Switzerland. A man with contacts and a little money can make rules bend like a piece of spaghetti."

This still didn't make sense to Louis. He bit his lip trying to think it through. "But a list like that, a list of accounts . . . how many . . ."

"Not so many as you'd think," said Travis. "Ended up with twenty-eight names. Then it was just a matter of tracking down phone numbers. We started with folks living in Italy. Eighteen of

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those. Then Enzo got on the horn. *See-nyor-uh* Tennenbaum?"

"And she—"

Travis was nodding. "And your girl said *Sí.* Phone call number eleven. Not bad when you think about it." He grunted, remembering. "I tell you, old Enzo sure liked that, pretending to be a godfather."

Louis didn't know what to say.

"But like I told you—in my business, I know people. I knew you wouldn't stay around, particularly when we asked for *half.* It's a simple thing, tailing a man who don't think he's being followed."

"Where's my wife?"

Travis snorted, his grin widening. He placed the pistol on the desk. "Son, I could've told you not to trust a girl like that. Strippers don't know the meaning of the word *loyalty.*"

"That's enough," said Louis.

Travis leaned forward, elbows on his knees. "Know where your sweetie is right now? She's on the train to Geneva. In the morning, as soon as the banks open, she's gonna clean out your account. She's *gone,* son."

"You're a liar," said Louis, because it was the only possible answer. "Just like your cousin back in Naples."

"Whose name is that bank account under? Who opened it? It sure ain't under your name." He shook his head. "She's certainly pulled the wool over your eyes."

Louis stared into the old Texan's eyes. He didn't believe this. It was unfathomable. But then, he had tried to leave her in Naples. Was it so unbelievable she'd try the same thing?

"Listen," said Travis. "I'm a rich man. I don't need your money. I just wanted to teach you a lesson. And it looks to me like the lesson's over. Your woman's left you, and she's taking all your cash." He shrugged, patted his knees, and stood up with a grunt. Then he pointed at Louis. "Now, don't you mess with Texas again." He chuckled and shook his head as he started toward the door. "Always wanted to say that."

"That's it?"

Travis turned back to him. "A religious man don't need to rub salt in it." He nodded at the pistol still on the desk. "Question is, what're you gonna do to straighten out your own house?"

Then he touched his brow, like a salute, and left.

Louis stared at the closed door a moment, before standing and looking at the clock—it was nine-thirty. Then he noticed the telephone behind the clock. His. He picked it up and found the icon of the battery, which was still more than a quarter full.

"Shit," he said.

2.

Enzo Cimino sat on a bench in the English Garden in central Geneva. Behind him, the lake began, blocked by ships moored in

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the harbor, and in front of him was a long building that lined the Quai du Général-Guisan. At number 2 was a plaque with the HSBC symbol: two white triangles on a red background, their tips touching in opposition.

He pulled his jacket tighter around him. Swiss mornings were too cool for a man his age. In Rome, the sun would already be baking the stones, and he'd be at the Cafe della Pace with his morning cappuccino and a Marlboro, looking at the pretty girls. But here there was no such option. He'd spent the night at the Gare de Cornavin, watching the woman from a distance as she curled up on a bench and dozed intermittently as trains came and went, then followed her out through the wide streets to the Pont du Mont-Blanc, where they both watched the sun rise over the mountains. She didn't seem particularly distraught to him; she on the contrary looked peaceful. She was a very beautiful woman, he thought, and that would make all this so much more difficult. But his American cousin had explained that it was necessary. And besides, Enzo was allowed to take all the money.

He had always been a hard worker, but even hard-working accountants, in Italy, made very little. He thought this when Travis first burst into his office—a typical rich man, too fat to do any real work. Was this how it was in America? You could be lazy and speak rudely, yet still become a rich man?

Unlike his people back in Sicily, Enzo didn't care about the distant family ties that connected him to these Texans—he'd never heard of them. They were simply an opportunity that had to be taken. Afterward, he'd buy himself a house along the Adriatic coast, in Le Marche, and take a little time off. After twenty years at the same desk, he deserved a vacation.

A real vacation couldn't be acquired by simply working hard. Rules had to be bent; compromises had to be made. He'd had one vacation like this before in his life. An American firm had wanted to sell their oil in Italy. They set up an office in Rome, stocked it with Italians—among them Enzo in accounting—and sent in an obtuse youngster from Mississippi to oversee everything. After six months, it became clear that no headway was being made, and the company, Lamarr Oil, was going to pull out. So Enzo did what any reasonable man would do. He doctored the books and filleted away sixty thousand dollars before putting in his two-week notice.

A half-year in Capri gave him a taste for the kind of life that, after today, would be his. It was the kind of life he deserved.

She'd been inside the bank for a little over a half-hour when he first saw the man, a croissant in one hand and a coffee in the other. He had been waiting in another corner of the park, and at first Enzo thought he'd been spotted. But no—Mr. Tennenbaum was focused on the same door he was watching. This was a surprise, because the man wasn't supposed to know that the wife had

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fled. But Enzo still carried the pistol Travis had lent him back in Rome—"For security, mind you, just in case"—and he still remembered enough of his military training to know how to use it.

The husband looked tired, more tired than Enzo, which would make this easier. When Tennenbaum learned his wife had fled, it must have driven him crazy. To imagine a man in his situation, who thinks his wife has cheated on him, and then that she's going to run off with all his money—well, it was difficult to imagine for a man like Enzo, who had never married. But he'd seen enough films to know it must be horrible.

Tennenbaum straightened, and so did Enzo. The door to number 2 opened, and she stepped out. She squinted from the morning sun, and bumped into a passerby, the thick plastic bag in her hand bouncing against her leg. Then she turned left, back toward the Pont du Mont-Blanc, and her husband followed. Enzo followed them both.

Travis was a slob, but he was no fool. He told Enzo that she would take the train, because, with airport security being what it is, the train was the only way to go. And it was the only place he could relieve her of her bag.

In the station, she bought a ticket at the counter, while her two shadows remained near the exits, watching. She reached into her bag to pay, then reached in again to buy a magazine, a Coke Light, and a few candy bars from a kiosk. Then they followed her to platform three, where all three waited for a half-hour for the train to Rome.

Enzo considered taking the bag right then. She was right there, the bag was there, and he was the one with a gun. But there were too many people, and her husband would intervene immediately. It would become messy very quickly, and though Enzo had spent his obligatory time in the military, he was not by nature a fighting man.

She boarded the first-class car, and through the windows he saw her take the third compartment back. Then he boarded at the other end of the car while her husband followed through the same side as she had entered.

He took a seat in another, unreserved first-class cabin compartment, and pulled the curtains over the door shut. He crossed a leg over the other and waited. The train pulled, then heaved, and was soon under way.

Louis stood by the bathroom door, watching the Gare de Cornavin slide slowly by. His face was red, he knew, because he could feel the heat in it. She'd walked like a princess out of the bank, her confidence bloated by the money in her bag. It made him sick, and at that moment, leaning against the door and trying to regulate his breaths, he wanted nothing more than to shoot her.

What had plagued him most while he was waiting for his early-

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morning train to Geneva, and later stood in the English Garden waiting for her to come out, was that she knew that she was going to leave him; she knew it from the moment she took out that telephone and found the battery still working. But she'd still slept with him. She'd given herself to him completely, in a way she seldom had, and this was something he could not adjust himself to. That the sex of betrayal could be so much better than the sex of trust.

But he had to forget that. He was exhausted from a sleepless night, obsessing over unimportant details. Only one thing mattered now: the money.

Other passengers squeezed past him, raising their luggage to get by, and made their way down the corridor to their seats. His hands trembled and he had trouble breathing deeply, but there was no use standing around. As Travis had said, it was time to put his house in order.

So he walked down the corridor, one hand gripping the pistol in his jacket pocket, and pulled open the third door down.

Meredith, one hand holding up a knee while above her on a shelf the plastic HSBC bag shook to the rhythm of the train, turned from the window. Her eyes grew, and her cheeks swelled, as if something large and uncomfortable was hidden in her mouth.

He stepped inside and pulled the door closed behind him, then sat across from her.

She didn't make any move to run, or to push him away, so he left the gun in his pocket. "What's going on, Mare?"

She chewed on air a moment. "I could ask you the same thing, Lou."

"Then ask."

"You were leaving me. I don't appreciate being made a fool of."

Louis nodded. "Okay. I was going to. The battery was fine. I thought you had . . ." He was having trouble finishing.

"I had what?"

"Balled an Italian back in Texas."

Meredith blinked, then her head rolled back. *"What?"*

"The Italian, in Piazza Bellini—he told me he'd figured out our plan because you told it to an ex-lover you ran into. Alfonso Lorenzo. He . . ." The surprise in her eyes made him confused. "I don't know. It made sense at the time. But then I realized it was a lie. On the train."

"And then?"

He blinked at her. "And then what?"

"And then you decided to fly back to Texas without me."

"No," he began, then something in his head, which had been wrong before, suddenly righted itself. He leaned close to her, but she pulled back. "Where did you get that information?"

"From your surrogate grandmother," Meredith said. "Sweet *Fanny.*"

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Louis rubbed his eyes roughly, so that when he brought his hands away he saw spots. He even grinned. "Jesus, Mare. We're both so goddamned stupid."

Then he explained who Travis and Fanny Mackey actually were.

He waited until the old, smiling conductor had come through and sold him a ticket. Lake Geneva had passed, and the train was rising into the mountains. Among trees, Enzo felt more comfortable. He touched the bulge in his pocket to reassure himself, then went out into the loud corridor.

He had to squeeze past a small woman smoking and staring out the window, and he wondered what she would do at the sound of a gunshot. Would she even recognize it as a gunshot? Maybe, but the wind and the rattling of the train through the open window was almost deafening, and she might just think it was the engine. She was old, anyway; she probably couldn't hear a thing.

He counted three doors back from the end of the car, waited in front of the drawn curtains, and pulled the door open.

Now, this was a surprise. Both of them. They were on the same seat, him stretched on top of her, and they were *kissing*. That made no sense. But as soon as he was inside, the man flustered and rolled off of her onto the floor. At least they still had their clothes on. Enzo had his pistol out before Mr. Tennenbaum could do anything. "Please," he said. "Both of you, sitting up."

This had really thrown them; he could tell. They both looked as if they were thinking very hard, but could not make sense of the world. There were, Enzo reflected, so many stupid people in the world.

Above them, on a metal shelf, sat the bank bag. He said, "You know what I've come for. No one needs to get hurt."

"Where did *you* come from?" Mrs. Tennenbaum said.

"It's not for you to worry about," he told them both, and reached his free hand to the shelf while they sulked deep in the seats. "My employers—"

"Travis and Fanny Mackey," said Mr. Tennenbaum, full of contempt.

"Fanny?" Enzo said, the bag now by his side; it was heavy.

"His wife," the woman told him.

Enzo hadn't known that Travis was married, nor that a woman had been part of this scheme of revenge. But that only meant that Travis had, like a good husband, made sure she was left out of this business.

"Now," he said, "I will leave you."

As he reached his gun hand for the door, something flashed in Mr. Tennenbaum's right hand. Something from his pocket—yes, a pistol. Everything seemed to follow very slowly. Tennenbaum raised his pistol; Enzo released the door; the woman shifted in surprise; and the man pulled the trigger at the same time Enzo

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pulled the trigger. The shot from Enzo's pistol exploded in the tiny space, snapping his ears, and Mr. Tennenbaum's chest—his shirt—was filled with blood.

Enzo checked his own chest; it was fine. The man's gun hadn't been loaded.

That's when the woman began to scream. Eyes completely round and a huge mouth that just wailed.

"Shut up!" he shouted. *"Silencio!"*

But she wouldn't. Her scream bellowed even louder than the gunshot, and so he did the only thing he knew to shut her up.

Fanny Mackey finished her cigarette and tossed it out the window once that stupid Italian entered their compartment. Then she took the cell phone out of her handbag and called Travis.

"Yeah? What's going on?"

"Calm yourself, dear."

"Well?"

A little boy passed her and she winked at him. "It's all fine, Travis. Just like you planned."

"What'd I tell you? Who knows people?"

"You know people, dear."

"Anything yet?"

"Hold your horses. I'll let you know."

"And he didn't see you?"

"Enzo?" she said. "Well, yes, but he never saw me before so it don't matter."

Then she caught her breath at the sound of a gunshot.

"Fanny?"

She exhaled. "That's one, dear."

Screaming followed, and in her ear her husband said, "Didn't I tell you? Didn't I tell you she'd be a screamer?"

"You told me," Fanny said as other compartment doors opened and people started looking out. Then a second shot sounded, and some of the people jumped back into their compartments and closed the door. A large man came out and looked at her. She shrugged and pointed at the third door down.

"Oh, I heard that!" said Travis. "That's just dandy!"

"It sure is, dear," she said as the conductor appeared at the end of the car, and the big man waved to him, pointing at the door, then held his hand like a pistol. The conductor looked alarmed, but the big man stepped closer to the door.

"You gonna tell him?" said Travis. "You gonna let him know?"

"I told you I would," she said. "Now wait."

The compartment door opened. Enzo appeared, one hand in his pocket, the other clutching the HSBC bag. He was covered in sweat, but trying to make a face as if nothing were wrong. Then the big man swiftly grabbed his arms and threw him to the dirty

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corridor floor. The conductor nervously moved closer. Enzo squirmed and dropped the bag, which spilled Swiss francs.

The big man paused, staring at the money, his knee firmly on Enzo's back, pressing him to the floor. The conductor pressed his shoulders, and Enzo turned his head back and forth, shouting, *"Lasciami andare!"*

The train hit a bump, and the door to the compartment slid open on its own. The conductor covered his mouth at the sight of the two bodies. The big man was still looking at the money. Neither noticed when the old woman approached, her mobile phone pressed to her ear as if she were alone, saying loudly to the caller, "I'm telling you, Travis! You don't mess with Lamarr Oil! That's something you just don't do! You mess with Lamarr Oil and you're sure to run into big trouble one day!"

Maybe it was her accent, or that it was strange to hear such an old woman speak so loudly, or maybe it was the name of the company—Lamarr Oil. But Enzo suddenly relaxed under the big man and twisted his head to look up at the old woman with baked hair who peered down, smiled, and turned to walk away. ●

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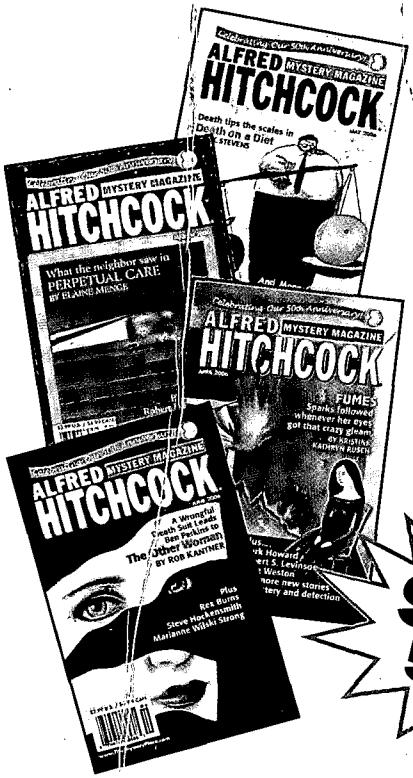
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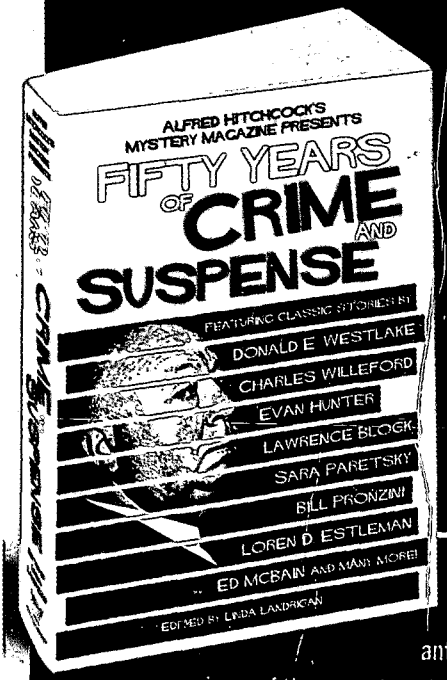

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